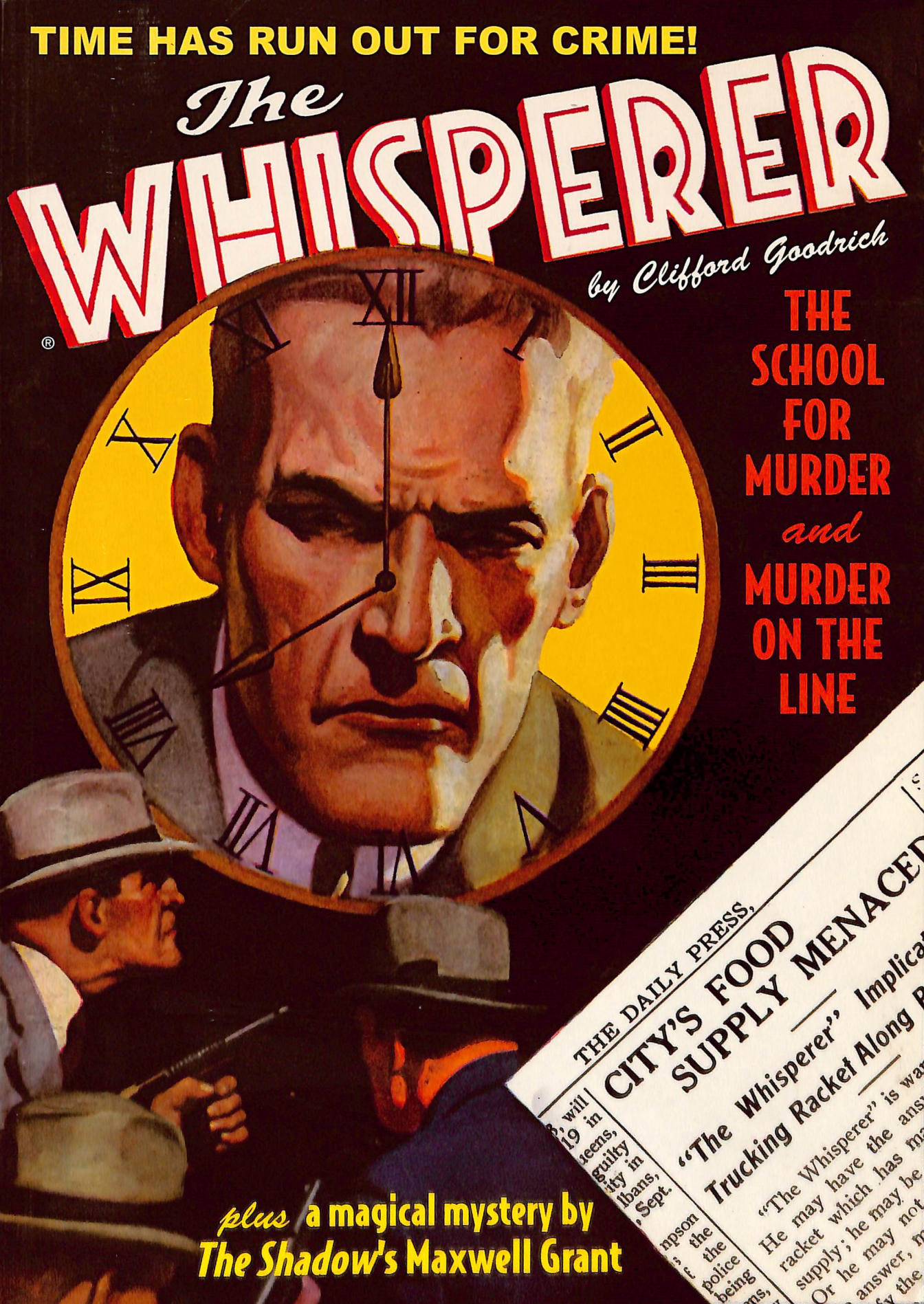
TIME HAS RUN OUT FOR CRIME!

The WHISPERER®

by Clifford Goodrich

THE SCHOOL FOR MURDER *and* MURDER ON THE LINE



plus a magical mystery by *The Shadow's* Maxwell Grant

The School for Murder
and
Murder on the Line

TWO HARD-BOILED ADVENTURES OF
The WHISPERER

by Laurence Donovan
writing as Clifford Goodrich

plus "Crime in the Crystal"—a Norgil mystery
by Walter B. Gibson writing as Maxwell Grant

with a new historical essay by
Will Murray and Anthony Tollin

SANCTUM BOOKS

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This Sanctum Books edition is an unabridged republication of the text and illustrations of two stories from *The Whisperer,* as originally published by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., N.Y.: *The School for Murder* from the March 1937 issue, and *Murder on the Line* from the May 1937 issue, plus "Crime in the Crystal" from the March 1940 issue of *Mystery Magazine.* This is a work of its time. Consequently, the text is reprinted intact in its original historical form, including occasional out-of-date ethnic and cultural stereotyping. Typographical errors have been tacitly corrected in this edition.

ISBN: 978-1-60877-070-0

First printing: January 2012

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The editors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Rick Lai, Jim Amash and Teresa Davidson in the preparation of this volume.

Published by Sanctum Books
P.O. Box 761474, San Antonio, TX 78245-1474

Visit The Whisperer at www.shadowsanctum.com.

TWO AMAZING ADVENTURES OF THE GRAY WRAITH

The WHISPERER

Volume 5

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The School For Murder

[It turned out star pupils to practice the trade of crime, but The Whisperer had another lesson to teach them!]

CHAPTER I
RED RUBY OF DEATH

THE slender fellow in white-fronted evening clothes halted on the black highway. He drew on thick rubber gloves carefully, as if to prevent soiling his hands. This, however, was not the real purpose of the gloves.

The man glanced up and down the highway to make sure no car was moving in his direction. He darted across the shallow roadside ditch to a point where a fragment of white cloth hung on the twelve-foot barbed wire fence.

The need of the rubber gloves became apparent. The man grasped the spiked wires near the white cloth and pulled. The wires spread apart.

The prowler's hands were spared the bite of the barbs, and his body was rendered immune to the shock of the high-voltage electricity running through the fence's wires.

As he came into the grounds, it could be seen that the slender fellow's face was young, almost

boyish, except for the compressed and slanted line of his mouth. He darted immediately into the dark shelter of thickly clustering shrubbery.

From this vintage point, the prowler could hear the mumbling undertone of two private policemen at a nearby iron-spiked gate. He had not been detected, and so far, so good. The brains behind this job had informed him he would be midway between two closely guarded gates. The barbed wire had been "doctored" at this point.

The youthful prowler's entrance to this extensive estate behind the barbed wire fence had not attracted the attention of the police guards. But his stealthy movements had not escaped notice altogether.

A girl's white face appeared above a dark, plain dress that made her a part of the shadows in the highway's ditch. She was attempting to repress any sound of the breath that came rapidly through her parted lips.

She had seen the man go through the wires, and she scuttled past the spot where the white cloth marked the place in the fence. The low throbbing of an automobile motor sounded on the highway, from a powerful engine, so silent that none but one aware of its presence would have heard it.

Seen in the darkness of the moonless night, the girl was only a blurred shadow. Her rapid steps were so light that she passed the guards at one gate without being observed.

At this point she paused, perhaps ten seconds, then whispered, "I can't do that to him!" and resumed her running along the hard highway.

THE slender fellow who had gained the inside of the guarded grounds was moving from flowering shrub to shrub, the darkness favoring his concealment. The bulk of the mansion, a quarter mile from the highway and a like distance from the shore of the lake to the prowler's left, had the appearance of a small, serrated hill.

Squares of lighted windows glowed at only two points. The trespasser noted these with a hissed exclamation. This was according to the schedule he had been given. The three closely spaced windows on the second floor, fronted by an iron balcony, had been fixed as his objective.

The prowler reached the final fringe of shrubbery and crouched there, waiting. He straightened the correct bow necktie on his faultless evening clothes, shrugging his shoulders as evidence that the collar and the neatly fitted shoulders were something to which he was unaccustomed.

About this time the girl, running along the road, heard the steady put-put of a motorcycle engine coming toward her. Only the county patrolmen used motorcycles in the Lakeside suburb, and this the girl seemed to know.

Before the slicing eye of the headlight had reached her the girl made for the concealment of the highway ditch.

At the same time the prowler crouched in the shrubbery directly under the lighted squares of the three closely spaced windows on the second floor, two police guards paced slowly along the lakeshore front of the big estate.

One said to the other, "The lady's nothing but a kid, and she likes to play with the floodlights. You gotta keep movin' until she's finished her little game."

He was speaking of the mistress of the great house. His statement that she was little more than a

child was hardly borne out by the appearance of the stately, beautiful woman before a mirror in the exquisite boudoir behind the three lighted windows on the second floor.

SHE was Mrs. Charles De Gron. Society reporters referred to her as The Mrs. De Gron. That may have been more a tribute to the De Gron millions—especially the De Gron jewels—than to the lady herself.

Mrs. De Gron was wearing a filmy, lacy negligee. She had fastened this with a clasp of white gold, in which glowed a single great ruby. As she surveyed herself in the mirror, certainly Mrs. De Gron had no thought that the crimson splash of the jewel against her white throat might look like a wound of murder.

The scarlet gem failed to suggest to the lovely young matron that it was like a glistening drop of freshly drawn blood. The Mrs. De Gron of exclusive Lakeside, was too well hedged about with every safeguard to imagine or fear she could become the victim of a thieving, cold-blooded killer. No mansion among all the residences of this wealthy suburb was more elaborately protected than the De Gron home.

Mrs. De Gron had taken the ruby clasp from among many jewels lying loosely on her dressing table. Several tidy fortunes were represented in the square-cut, huge De Gron emeralds, the blue De Gron diamonds, the matched De Gron pearls and the De Gron blood rubies.

Yet these jewels, surpassed by but few collections for perfection, matching and size, lay loosely exposed upon the dressing table. The beautiful matron lifted some of them with one white hand, and they dribbled over her fingers like varicolored flames.

The fortune was carelessly displayed, but this was not so careless as it would have seemed. Charles De Gron was a noted collector and exhibitor of rare jewels. His big estate, sloping down to the lakeshore, had its own perfect system to thwart any criminal's daring.

Charles De Gron's own private collection far surpassed in value the jewels he had given his young wife.

Mrs. De Gron was preparing to retire. Her triple French windows opened upon a small balcony with an iron railing. Occasional twinkling lights of boats on the lake were the only luminance in the moonless night.

The lucky young woman of fortune stepped to the four-poster bed and touched a switch concealed near its head. This was so located she might have snapped it on without lifting her head from the pillows.

More than a score of brilliant floodlights leaped into white flame about the mansion and the spacious grounds. The sloping quarter mile of smooth lawn between the mansion and the lake took on the appearance of a flying field at night.

The woman at one of the windows could see distinctly two uniformed guards near the private dock. She was aware there were three other pairs of guards at three gates.

More than two miles of barbed wire fence was charged with high-voltage electricity.

Mrs. De Gron turned out the lights with a happy satisfaction. Her jewels were safe enough. She was beyond reach of the most resourceful of criminals. She could not know the floodlights had struck upon a young face, but one marred by the cruel, downward slant of the compressed mouth.

The prowler may have been startled by the sudden leaping on of the floodlights, but when they were quickly extinguished and the illumination had faded from the woman's windows, he breathed easier.

A minute passed, another five, then ten. The intruder in evening clothes started climbing the trellised vines below the balcony of Mrs. De Gron's room.

AT this time the girl who had been running along the road was crouching in the ditch, keeping down and crawling along it like some scared wild animal. Her breath heaved in choking sobs, from exertion and fear.

The patrolman on the motorcycle had caught a passing glimpse of the girl in his headlight. His machine stopped on squealing rubber, and he slid off. If his eyes had not been seeking the woman who had appeared to dive off the concrete shoulder of the highway, he would have seen the low-slung car a short distance away under the trees.

The girl had seen the car, and she was making her way toward it. The county copper shouted, "Who's down here? Are you hurt? If you ain't, come on out!"

The girl was opposite the yawning mouth of a tiled drain under the roadway. She slipped into its concealment and waited as the patrolman used a flashlight and blundered along the ditch.

He gave up the search with a puzzled oath and went back to his motorcycle. There he discovered that his headlight had been put out by the breaking of a bulb as he had dropped the machine. The county copper disliked mysteries on his patrol beat in this district of millionaires. If anything happened, he would be held partly responsible. He ran his motorcycle to the nearest entrance gate into the De Gron estate and halted to talk with two private guards.

"No, we ain't seen anything," said one of the guards. "Them floodlights was the lady havin' her evenin's fun. She likes to play with 'em, so we don't know when there is a real alarm."

Mrs. De Gron was slipping into the great four-poster bed a minute after the floodlights and the lights in her own room were off. There remained only a night light in the adjacent bathroom with its tiled pool. The woman did not hear the soft opening of a window screen.

Then, suddenly, there was a man's figure standing between the big bed and the lighted doorway of the bathroom. There was only light enough to see that the intruder was slender, and that he wore correct evening clothes.

Perhaps this latter item delayed Mrs. De Gron's scream of fear or her reach for the floodlight switch and the alarm button beside it. She had only to move her hand a few inches to set a big gong ringing and illuminate the grounds.

Beady eyes in the tight mask over the intruder's face saw the movement of the woman's right hand. His body moved with the quickness of a snake striking.

"None o' that, you!" he snarled. "Keep your hands down an' your mouth shut an' you won't be hurt! Where's your rocks? That's all you're gonna spill!"

The beautiful Mrs. De Gron had not been schooled enough in discreet behavior with burglars. She possibly believed it too incredible that such an intruder should be here. Perhaps she counted too much on the proximity of armed guards, the devices arranged to prevent just such an invasion.

MRS. DE GRON screamed, or rather she opened her mouth and the cry began. The intruder swore sharply, and one balled fist smashed brutally into the woman's pretty face, crushing her lips on her teeth and breaking her nose.

Then Mrs. De Gron tried to fight, to free herself. The intruder seemed cold-blooded enough about what he did, but there was evidence of panic in his quick movements.

One hand dug into the white throat above the great red ruby, and when the woman's mouth was gaping open and her struggles were becoming more feeble, he pulled her lightly clad body from the bed.

He stood there holding the limp figure and listening. The ten or fifteen seconds of struggle apparently had aroused no one. The man dragged the body toward the dimly lighted bathroom. There Mrs. De Gron stirred and moaned, her bruised lips parting and her wide eyes slowly opening.

"Keep quiet!" snapped the intruder. "Don't move or make a sound!"

He stepped back to the door and shot the beam of a flashlight with probing slowness around the luxurious boudoir. His own breath hissed through

his teeth as the ray caused liquid fire to jump from the mass of jewels laid loosely on the dressing table. He started toward these.

Mrs. De Gron might have escaped with her life if she had been conscious and cool. Her moan suddenly became another scream.

"Damn you!" snarled the thief. "You wouldn't listen!"

He whipped back into the bathroom, closed the door behind him. Mrs. De Gron had staggered to her feet, and the masked youth knocked her down. As her head struck the tiled floor near the bath pool, the intruder snatched a towel from a nearby rack, gave it a stringy twist and fastened it around the beautiful woman's throat.

There was still panicky swiftness in the way the towel was twisted, until Mrs. De Gron's hands stopped beating on the tiled floor. The thief pulled a knot into the twisted towel and went back into the room where the jewels lay on the table.

ON the highway, the motorcycle man ended his conversation with the guards, put in a new headlight bulb and roared away. One private guard said, "Now that the lady has had her little show for the night, I'm takin' a short snooze."

He went into the little house beside the entrance gate. The other guard started patrolling slowly along the driveway toward the mansion. What he first saw, he believed to be a shadow; but the shadow moved and turned just enough to show the white gleam of a face.

The guard ran forward, calling out, "Hey! Hold on there! You can't sneak out've the grounds at night without a permit! You know that damn well!"

He had made the mistake of believing one of the servants might be attempting to keep a tryst outside the grounds. The guard was sure no one could have entered from the outside.

The guard's error cost him his life. When he saw his mistake and snatched at his holstered gun, the man moving through the shrubbery was already shooting. Three slices of pale fire leaped toward the guard from a silenced automatic.

The private policeman groaned and crumpled under the impact of bullets, though there was only a spiteful crackling. The man in the shrubbery darted away toward the place where the white cloth marked the opening made in the charged barbed wire fence.

CHAPTER II
THE GIRL ON THE ROAD

THE cracking shots on the estate of Charles De Gron reached the keen ears of the girl hiding on the highway culvert. Perhaps she would have missed them if she had not been listening fearfully, desperately.

"I know it!" she sobbed, breathlessly. "Paul! Paul! I've got to get you out of this!"

Beside the highway, a wide flame like daylight leaped out from the De Gron floodlights. A brass-voiced bell started booming, and there was shouting.

Fortunately for the girl, the illumination inside the spacious grounds only served to throw the highway and the shallow ditch into a blacker shadow.

The desperate, sobbing girl again ran toward the low-slung car. She reached it, and at the sound of her coming a youth who was tensely holding the steering wheel started up and snatched at a side pocket of the car. His hand held an automatic, and it swung on the girl before her face came close enough to be identified.

"Paul! Paul!" the girl cried out. "I knew you'd be here! You've got to get away! Come on, take me out of here before they find us! There's been a killing, like I was sure there would be!"

"Eve! You fool! You fool!" grated the man in the car. "How did you get here? You knew—"

The girl caught his arm, pinching it, seizing the pistol in his hand. Her movement was so unexpected, she got the weapon and sent it spinning into the bushes.

"I know it's murder, Paul! It's because he's my brother! He could talk you into anything! Now this, and it's murder! I know it's murder! Please, let's go—let's go before someone comes!"

The car's driver was clearly not hardened, but he was stubborn.

"I can't—I won't leave him here! Eve, sweetheart, you get away. Hide and get away. Nobody could have been hurt. Why, he told me it was all fixed, and it means a stake for us, Eve. After this one time, we're taking the money and going away. We're getting married, and we need it!"

The girl attempted to throw the car into gear, and the man's hands pushed her away.

"Oh, you fool!" she cried out, huskily. "Don't you see they'll send you to the chair, along with him! You can't wait! You've always been straight, and if he hadn't been my brother—"

"He's been good to me," said the man steadily. "He promised to stake me so's we could get married. That's why I'm here, and if he's in trouble I can't be rat enough to leave him."

THE lights of the instrument board revealed the girl's wide, brown eyes filled with tears. She caught the man's head suddenly in her arms and called him a great baby. She said her brother was no good, never had been any good and never would be.

"He doesn't belong to me—to us, Paul!" she almost screamed.

He was forced to clamp a hand over her mouth. But she pushed it away and told him he was in a trap—the kind of trap from which he could never escape. "We'll never be married," she said, firmly.

"If you help my brother get away, they've got you. You know they've got you, and you don't even know who my brother is working for—robbing, killing—"

Her words indicated that the girl knew a great deal of her brother's business and believed him to be the tool of others. Unfortunately those last words reached the ears of the young fellow in the evening suit. His hard face seemed to jump toward the car from the highway.

His tight mouth was slanted and even more cruel. His eyes were narrowed, and neither the driver nor the girl could see the panic of a fleeing murderer in them.

"So you had to butt in!" snarled the killer at the girl. "You couldn't keep out of this!"

He added a vicious oath and smashed a straight-armed fist into the face of the girl who had said she was his sister. His hands hooked her slender neck and her from the car, hurling her into the ditch.

"You can't do that to her!" shouted the driver, jerking his legs from underneath the wheel. "Damn you, that's too much!"

One of his fists split the tight lips of the slanted mouth and rolled the other man to the ground. But before he could follow up his advantage, the De Gron killer reared to his heels and jammed his pistol into the other man's stomach.

"Get back into that car! Get in, I say; before I let out your guts! You'll only be the third one!"

"Third one—You did—it was murder?"

A slapping hand clipped across the young driver's accusing mouth. He seemed like a man in a dream as the pistol bored into his side, and he heard the girl moaning on the ground near the car.

The bonging of the brass-mouthed gong at the De Gron mansion was joined by the wailing of a motorcycle siren. Soon there would be a screeching of many such sirens.

"Get goin', or do I plug her and you both and lam out of here alone?"

The hard-faced brother of the girl on the ground swung his weapon away from the driver, and added: "She knows too damn much, anyway!"

"No! No!" cried the man at the wheel, jamming in the gears and jumping the low-slung car out onto the highway. "You can't do that!"

The killer's pistol cracked viciously, but the car had jumped ahead and the bullet went into the ground. Perhaps it was a bluff, but it was apparent he would not have let the life of his own sister stand between him and freedom.

The low-slung car gathered speed and its comparative silence enabled the pair in it to get beyond the immediate radius of the alarm before the motorcycle patrolman reached the place.

THE county copper on the motorcycle missed the body of the girl lying in the ditch to one side of the highway as he shot up the road; keeping an eye open for the possible light of a fleeing car. He picked up none, for the killer's auto was moving in darkness.

The telephone alarm had been fast, and another police siren screamed, coming from the direction of the business area of Lakeside. A squad car loaded with policemen from the suburban precinct station bore down on the motorcycle man, and he flagged them down.

"Guess it was only some prowler who got a guard, but he got him cold inside the De Gron grounds," announced the county copper. "The other fellows are checking up to see if anything has been taken inside the house."

About this time, Charles De Gron himself, some servants and the guards, had forced their way into the rooms of Mrs. De Gron. The husband and others were desperately seeking to find a spark of life in the cruelly strangled woman on the bathroom floor.

They thought at first she had been stabbed; then the servants gasped, and a maid fainted when they saw it was not a drop of blood, but the great ruby on the woman's throat. But there was no spark of life to bring warm color back to the terribly purpled face of the throttled woman.

This feature of the robbery and murders had not been imparted to the police when the squad car had left the precinct station. The police driver said they had passed no car, but there were half a dozen side roads where an automobile could have turned off.

One of the toughest homicide men in the department was in charge of the car. He was known as "Boots" Gorson, a hard-boiled dick, noted for his third-degree methods. It was said that Gorson's third-degree methods had convicted more men than any other evidence ever produced.

As the county copper turned to accompany the squad car, an oath ripped from Boots Gorson, and his heavy jaws snapped together.

"Wouldja get a load o' that! Where'd the dame come from?"

THE dame of whom he spoke was a girl with a white face, and blood was trickling from her nose and mashed lips. Plainly, she was in a dazed condition, for she would not have stumbled blindly into the path of the squad car's headlights.

Tires screamed and the car's bumper only pushed the girl to the concrete, but her escape from going under the wheels was narrow. Boots Gorson was out, his thick lips twisting and his words mixed with profane emphasis.

"On your feet, you! C'mon! Don't start pullin' any dumb stuff! So you come out here with the rats, an' one of 'em conked yuh?"

A wealth of tousled, black hair fell around the girl's white face, and she was pretty. Her big eyes stared vacantly at the surrounding policemen. She shook her head as if she could not find words.

Boots Gorson swore again and shook her slim body until her head rocked. "Spill it, sister! Out with the dirt! It won't get you nothin' to hold out! Who pulled that bump-off at the De Gron place? Maybe you're one of the maids, huh? Maybe it's an inside job?" "Maid?" murmured the girl, her gaze still stupid. "I was a maid, but not at the De Gron place. A bump-off? A murder, you mean? I don't know about any murder."

Boots Gorson shook her again, and roared. One of the squad men said, "Aw, ease off, Boots, she ain't anything but a kid!"

The motorcycle man said, "Maybe she was walking home from a ride. I thought I saw a girl on the road before all this happened."

Apparently that supplied the girl with her idea. She nodded slowly.

"He—he threw me out of his car," she said, slowly. "Yes, I remember. He was mean to me, and when I tried to get out he hit me with his fist, and I fell down."

"Nuts!" snapped Boots Gorson. "You mean you were planted out here as a lookout and got crossed up! What's your name?"

"Eve," she said. "Eve Willoughby, and I tell you I went out for a ride, and when I went to get out of the car he hit me."

"Who hit you? Don't lie!"

The girl shook her head slowly.

"I didn't mean the man I was riding with hit me," she said, as if remembering. "We just quarreled and we're going to be married. I was mad and got out to walk. A strange man came running with a pistol and knocked me down, and then he went toward Paul—toward the car."

"Paul, huh? Paul who?" rasped Boots Gorson. "You're lyin', or you wouldn't have changed your story!"

APPARENTLY Eve Willoughby was a smart girl. She had only one purpose: That was to protect the youth she had called "Paul."

"He was Paul Brandt, and we're going to be married," she insisted. "The man who knocked me down ran toward his car with a gun. Oh, maybe he's been killed!"

Eve Willoughby suddenly gave a very good exhibition of hysteria. She insisted wildly the strange man with a pistol must have killed her sweetheart, Paul Brandt.

It was unfortunate for Eve Willoughby that she had changed her story of why she was on the highway. A second car came roaring along the highway.

It braked down alongside Boots Gorson's squad car.

"Whatcha got there, Boots?" asked one of the men. "A dame, huh? Well, maybe she knows something about this mug we picked up by cutting across the ridge road when we got the radio call!"

A pale youth with burning eyes, who apparently was only beginning to recover from a rap that had put a welt over one eye, was pushed into the highway.

The girl's involuntary, "Paul! Paul! You're hurt!" and her quick attempt to rush to him furnished the identity that brought a satisfied chuckle to Boots Gorson.

"So this is your Paul, huh?" he grated. "An' he's the lad some strange man with a rod must've batted one? Is that the idea?"

"He's been bumped hard, all right," supplied one of the other squad men. "But it looks like it was a case of another mug wantin' to make a clean getaway an' thinkin' he'd finish this guy off. Have a look at these."

He displayed half a dozen flashing blue diamonds in the palm of one hand. He said they had spilled over the seat of the roadster in which they had picked up the unconscious youth, and looked like they might have broken off a string.

"Them's some of the De Gron rocks!" announced Boots Gorson. "So you was walkin' home from a ride, and then a nice, accommodating guy comes along with a gun an'—"

"Shut up, Boots!" snapped another homicide man. "What's the idea in tippin' him off to the girl's buildup? Now, fellow, how come you were in that car with them rocks?"

Eve Willoughby was too fast for the detective's ruse.

"I told you we quarreled, and that a man with a gun knocked me down and went after Paul's car—"

"You smart egg!" rapped Boots Gorson, one of his calloused hands slapping her roughly across the mouth. "Tippin' him off, huh?"

Then he got a sudden twist on one of Paul Brandt's wrist."

"You tell the truth! Tryin' to make a getaway, an' your pal gave you the works, huh?"

PAUL BRANDT was young and scared, but he was smart. He said the girl had told the truth, and that was the way of it. He swore he had never seen the man who knocked him out until the fellow came running up the highway with a pistol in his hand.

Boots Gorson swore some more and ordered the pair taken in. He headed the squad that went on to the De Gron place. Five minutes later, they learned there had been much more than a murdered guard.

The Mrs. De Gron of Lakeside had been brutally murdered. Every man there knew this was a murder that would rock the department. The coppers attempted to check up on the jewelry taken, but Charles De Gron was too stricken with grief to talk about it.

"None of that can bring back my wife," he said heavily. "It was quite an amount, but that can wait. You've got to get my wife's murderer. I'll kill him myself when you do, I tell you!"

The policemen had the greatest sympathy for Charles De Gron. The man was tall, and his shoulders sagged. A short scar over one eye had turned white and contrasted strangely with his thick, black hair.

"Has Commissioner Gordon been told about this?" said one of the coppers.

"To hell with Wildcat Gordon!" snapped Boots Gorson. "By the time he finds this out, I'll have the case broken wide open!"

Boots Gorson stationed men, then went out with a grimness that verged upon brutal intention.

CHAPTER III
"BOOTS" GETS THE BOOT

EVE WILLOUGHBY was a drab, pathetic figure seated on a hard wooden chair in the grimy outer office of the suburban precinct station. There was nothing fatherly or sympathetic in the glances bestowed upon her from time to time by the grisled, veteran sergeant at the desk.

The girl would have been surprised to know that Sergeant Moran wished he could take her home and turn her over to his wife. Sergeant Moran was that soft inside, and he had lost a daughter about Eve's own age.

Eve's face was swollen from her brother's blow, But she had not broken under pounding questions from Boots Gorson. She stuck to her story that a strange man with a gun had knocked her down, then started after Paul Brandt.

But Eve was being shaken from head to foot. She was sitting near a closed door. From behind that door came the thudding of blows. At first, these had brought no results but now a deep groan of pain was following each blow.

Paul Brandt was in there with Boots Gorson. Jim Mulcahey, a detective, was helping out Boots in his bit of inquisition. Eve Willoughby could hear Boots Gorson talking.

"All right, punk! So that's your story, huh? Who backed you in framin' that damn lie?"

Then came the murmur of another voice—Paul Brandt's. Then there came the squashing thud of another blow and a faint, "Don't! I can't stand much more of it! But I'm tellin' you the truth!"

Eve Willoughby knew Paul Brandt was taking it—taking it to protect her no-good brother, herself. She hadn't loved Paul Brandt enough. She had never realized until now the steel grit he possessed.

"If you know anything, young woman, you'd better spill it," advised Sergeant Moran. "I'd as 'lieve go to the chair myself an' have it over with, as to have Boots Gorson work on me. He knows ways to hurt yuh that ain't in the book."

At that instant, a scream of pain came from the inner room. Boots Gorson was applying one of his most effective methods.

Eve Willoughby sobbed aloud. If Paul Brandt talked, that meant a murder rap for her brother. She had no such sisterly devotion to that hard-mouthed mug as to protect him, but she realized that Paul Brandt would go along with him to the chair.

The law did not discriminate between the actual killer and any man who had aided in the same crime. Yet Eve Willoughby was convinced that Paul Brandt never would have been drawn into this trap if he had suspected that violence or murder would have been the result.

Paul Brandt was showing remarkable gameness now. Even the veteran Sergeant Moran drew down his mouth and shook his head. One scream that had come from the inner room hadn't sounded human.

At that, Eve Willoughby was on her feet. Her small fists pounded at the closed door.

"He didn't do it!" she screamed. "He didn't know! Don't—don't hurt him anymore!"

"Who's hurting who?" came a crisp, concise voice directly behind her. "Suppose you tell me?"

EVE WILLOUGHBY'S stricken, tear-stained face glowed over one shoulder. Two men had just walked in. The man who had spoken had a new hat of army type pulled down until only one eye was showing. It looked like a slaty gray bit of agate seen through a narrow slit.

The man's eyes were neither blue nor gray, but almost without specific color. They had the cold lack of emotion to be found among certain famous killers of the Southwest police; they were Texas eyes.

As for the rest of him, the man was wearing a suit of violent brown stripes, brilliant yellow shoes, a gaudily red necktie and a crimson carnation in his coat lapel. He looked like any person on Earth but who he really was.

This was James "Wildcat" Gordon, noted commissioner of police. Wildcat, because his five feet five inches were reported to carry pounds of fighting dynamite to the inch.

Eve Willoughby stared at the flamboyant figure.

"Who—who are you? Oh, can you do anything? They're killing him in there—and he didn't do it!"

"The guy's moll, huh?" rapped the man with

Wildcat Gordon from an unpleasantly small buttonhole of a mouth situated under a hooked nose. "That gives us a break, Gordon! When I heard they was workin' on the mug that was in on the De Gron bump-off, I didn't hear anything about the dame! Come here, you!"

The man was Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton. For years, he had wanted the job of police commissioner. In the months Wildcat Gordon had been on the job, the efforts of Henry Bolton had been a continual campaign to discredit Wildcat Gordon and have him ousted.

A few times, he had almost succeeded, only to have his own dumbness come back and rap him on the chin. But he never quit trying. And in this, Henry Bolton was backed up by Mayor Van Royston, who disapproved of Wildcat Gordon's army methods of breaking cases in the underworld.

Eve Willoughby knew nothing of this setup, or of the gray-eyed fellow with the army hat who had asked her a question. One of Henry Bolton's long arms reached out, and his clawlike fingers pinched into the soft flesh of her arm.

The slender girl winced with pain; her already bruised lips quivered as she cried out.

WILDCAT GORDON'S hand moved so quickly it could hardly be detected. One of Henry Bolton's long ears snapped down and back to his head as if it had been a rubber band. The deputy howled; his hand dropped from the girl's arm.

"What the devil did you do that for?"

"I'm asking the questions here," stated Wildcat Gordon, calmly. "The next time you put your hands on this girl or any other woman in custody, I'm going to knock you right out from between your ears. Sit down, young woman."

Wildcat Gordon turned to Sergeant Moran and inquired what was going on in the closed room. Henry Bolton growled out a reply.

"That's Boots Gorson softenin' up the punk in that De Gron bump-off, an' when Boots softens them they stay soft!"

"Yeah?" snapped Wildcat.

"Please, oh, please, can't somebody do something?" cried the girl, as knuckles meeting flesh brought another moaning scream. "He didn't do it, I tell you! It was—"

Wildcat Gordon did a peculiar thing for a police commissioner.

"Shut up," he snapped at the girl, "before you say something! Henry, kick that door open!"

"But, Gordon!" protested Henry Bolton. "Boots Gorson never failed to break a case! I don't want to interfere—"

Deputy Henry Bolton interfered with a promptness and violence that left even old Sergeant

Moran gasping. The big deputy was caught between Wildcat's steel-wire hands and rammed suddenly against the door with a force that cracked a panel.

"Open up in there!" rapped out Wildcat Gordon. "An' don't hit that prisoner again!"

WITH the crashing open of the panel, Boots Gorson pulled his heavy head around and grinned ironically. He opened the battered door.

"Hello, commissioner!" he grunted. "In another minute I'll have this punk sayin' his grandmother done it! Here, you!"

Paul Brandt was pallid, and his lips were writhing with pain. Boots Gorson wrenched one of the youth's wrists toward him and jerked it over. There was a definite snap of a breaking bone.

"I don't know anything, I tell you!" the youth screamed. "A man hit me over the head an' the car was smashed! I didn't have those diamonds on me!"

"You see, commissioner!" grated Boots Gorson. "He's comin' to it! That damn moll out there put him up to it!"

Wildcat Gordon's yellow-shoed feet were planted solidly and wide apart. He had not spoken, but was taking in Boots Gorson and Detective Jim Mulcahey with his cold Texas eyes.

"I told you, Gordon, they'd be breakin' the case!" asserted Deputy Henry Bolton. "Boots knows how to soften up these punks!"

At that, Boots Gorson grinned evilly, let go of Paul Brandt's dangling, broken wrist and smashed a fist into the youth's face. From the broken door, Eve Willoughby cried out as sharply as if the blow had struck her own face.

"Hold it, Boots!" rapped Wildcat Gordon. "So you call that softening up a punk, eh? Too bad you don't try some of the same medicine on some higher-ups of the political rackets! If you'd do some third-degreeing among the shyster lawyers and one or two judges I know, I might be for you! But you have to soften up a sniveling kid like that!"

"Sa-ay!" bellowed Boots Gorson. "I've been in this department ten times as long as you, commissioner, an' I know what's what! This punk's going to talk!"

Paul Brandt was helpless, sagging into a chair, moaning from the pain of his fractured wrist. Boots Gorson slapped him again brutally, the blood welling under the hard hand.

Wildcat's planted feet left the floor. Boots Gorson and Jim Mulcahey were standing close together. Either man outweighed Wildcat by fifty pounds. But his smashing knuckles somehow contrived to find both of their chins.

The surprise of the commissioner's action sent both men back on their heels before they could lift their hands.

"Put 'em up, and try softenin' me up!" roared Wildcat. "I'm not much bigger than the kid you've been beatin', so come on!"

BOOTS GORSON and Jim Mulcahey spewed oaths and hesitated the fraction of a second before swinging at the commissioner. The delay was unfortunate for them. Wildcat Gordon was between the two bigger men.

One fist drove into the paunchy stomach of Jim Mulcahey, and the heel of one yellow shoe snapped

backward and sounded like pieces of wood slapping together as it caught one of Boots Gorson's elbows.

Boots groaned and spun around, but came back with froth at the corners of his mouth.

The ensuing three or four minutes saw the identities of police commissioner and his men entirely forgotten. Gorson and Mulcahey endeavored to entrap the smashing Wildcat between them. Blows only succeeded in knocking the army hat from his reddish hair.

It could hardly be said that Wildcat fought according to the rules of the squared circle. There may have been rules in the army where he had been an officer, but this brief battle had more the tactics of the old frontier, where lumberjacks used everything from hobnailed heels to teeth.

Wildcat's teeth were about the only weapon he neglected to employ. He had collected a black eye, and his nose was bleeding when he lifted the paunchy Boots Gorson from the floor with a clean uppercut to the chin.

Boots toppled and fell over the chair in which Paul Brandt had gone limp and unconscious. Jim Mulcahey backed up groggily and sat down over by one wall.

Wildcat wiped the blood from his chin. He stepped from Boots Gorson to Jim Mulcahey and ripped the badges from under their vests.

"Been in the department ten times as long as I have, huh?" he exploded. "Well, from here on we'll start evening that up! You're out of the department now, both of you, and you can take that up with the board and be damned to you!"

Deputy Henry Bolton puckered his small mouth and shook his long-eared head.

"You can't do that to men that's been on the force as long as Boots Gorson! Mayor Van Royston won't stand for it, and the board'll reinstate them on my testimony! They was only softenin' up a punk!"

Wildcat's grin matched his cold eyes as he replaced his army hat.

"You're testifying for them, are you, Henry?" he said, mildly. "You know, Henry, you're ambitious, and if I were you I wouldn't remember anything I'd seen."

Paul Brandt was out, his right hand sticking from his wrist at an odd angle. Wildcat rapped out an order to Sergeant Moran to have the ambulance over and get the youth to a hospital.

"The police emergency, sir?" said Sergeant Moran, a humorous light behind his eyes showing his appreciation of the scene.

"I said a hospital, Sergeant Moran," stated Wildcat. "You can order a police guard. That will be all."

Henry Bolton was sputtering that the young man was a murder suspect and could not be taken outside, but his words drifted into deaf ears. Wildcat Gordon had called Eve Willoughby into the room from which Boots Gorson and Jim Mulcahey had made their profane and muttering way.

AS Paul Brandt was being removed, Wildcat held a short conversation with the plainly terrified girl.

"That's all there is, Commissioner Gordon," the girl finally insisted. "Paul and I quarreled, and I jumped out of the car. I ran into a strange masked

man with a gun. He struck me, and I saw him going toward the car."

Wildcat smiled grimly.

"I'm taking you home in my own car, Miss Willoughby," he stated. "You know you should be locked up as a material witness, and you know that you're lying to me. Possibly tomorrow or the next day you'll see where you ought to tell the truth, but it isn't the man you say knocked you out that you're afraid of. When you get ready to talk, I want to know about the men behind Paul Brandt and the other one."

Eve Willoughby stared at him speechlessly. Her pretty lips were pressed tightly together. Wildcat did not need words to inform him he had hit the truth. The girl was in fear of her life, afraid of others than those directly concerned in the De Gron robbery and murder.

Eve Willoughby resided in a narrow tenement street, thronged with half-naked children and push-cart peddlers. Wildcat was sure the girl lived here, when he heard the greeting of half a dozen youngsters at the stoop of the old-fashioned house in the slums.

Fifteen minutes later, Wildcat Gordon was back at headquarters and walked into a seething conference in his own office. Mayor Van Royston, Deputy Henry Bolton and Charles De Gron himself were waiting for the commissioner. Half a dozen society leaders from Lakeside had accompanied the grief-stricken De Gron.

CHAPTER IV
DEATH FOR BUNGLERS

THE short, white scar over Charles De Gron's right eye was a sharp contrast to his raven black hair and gave him a solemn appearance. He was a tall man, with muscles working under his ears when he talked.

"Commissioner Gordon," he demanded, "I want to know by what right this man, this Paul Brandt they picked up, was taken from the Lakeside precinct and put in an outside hospital? I went there to find him, and he was gone!"

Wildcat Gordon took into account that the noted collector of jewels was under a great strain, had just suffered intense shock in the murder of his young wife. He spoke sympathetically.

"I know, Mr. De Gron, about how you feel," he said. "Personally, I probably would have gone over to the Lakeside station, if I had been in your place, and filled Paul Brandt full of lead without asking questions."

"What? What?" gasped De Gron. "How did you know—"

Wildcat interrupted with a tight grin.

"I didn't know, but I only stated what I would have done if I had been in your shoes, Mr. De Gron. I may say that we're going to get the murderer, and I know it looks very bad for this young Paul Brandt, but he isn't the killer."

"I've heard all about what you've done to two of our men, Gordon!" put in Mayor Van Royston, who was wearing his usual dinner clothes and the inevitable tall, silk hat. The mayor's retreating chin bobbed as he talked. "Gorson and Mulcahey were only doing the proper thing! I shall see that they are reinstated at once!"

Wildcat Gordon walked over to his desk and elevated his yellow shoes to one corner. His Texas eyes slanted upon the mayor and the others in the room.

"Do that, mayor," said Wildcat, cheerfully, "and I shall see that they are assigned to janitor service the rest of the time I'm in this department."

Henry Bolton whispered a few words into one of Mayor Van Royston's ears. The mayor's chin bobbed more than ever as he stared at Wildcat.

"Henry tells me you've released this girl, the one witness who knows all about the murder!" Van Royston exploded.

"Henry always sticks carefully to facts," agreed Wildcat. "I not only released her, but I personally escorted her home. I'm only hoping this Paul Brandt doesn't pass out as the result of police brutality. I understood, Mayor Van Royston, you were opposed to use of the third-degree method in any kind of a case?"

BEFORE Mayor Van Royston could reply, Charles De Gron strode quickly over to Wildcat Gordon's desk. The white scar over his eyes looked like a danger signal.

"Forget that I'm suffering over the brutal murder of my wife, Gordon," he said heavily. "I've heard a great deal about your success. Whatever you do is all right with me, and I believe you'll get the brutal killer in this case. I think you did right about putting this Paul Brandt in a hospital for his injuries."

"Thanks," said Wildcat, "and you're showing good sense, Mr. De Gron. It is an accepted principle that any accomplice in a crime where there is murder is equally responsible with the killer. Perhaps there are exceptions."

"There could be no exceptions!" rapped out Mayor Van Royston. "I demand that this Paul Brandt be removed from the outside hospital to jail and charged with first-degree murder!" Wildcat Gordon flicked a petal from the red carnation in his buttonhole.

"Now isn't that too bad you feel that way about it," stated Wildcat, regretfully, "after I had Paul

Brandt's broken wrist fixed up and had him released."

"Released?" shouted Mayor Van Royston and Henry Bolton together. "You mean you let that fellow go, turned him loose?"

"I'm afraid that's the situation," said Wildcat, calmly. "And, gentlemen, I'm the officer in charge of this police department. I have my own reasons for seeing that Eve Willoughby went home, and that the boy two of my men beat up was given his liberty on his own word to stay in touch with us."

There was sudden, violent comment among the Lakeside neighbors of Charles De Gron who had accompanied him to police headquarters. These half a dozen men were substantial, wealthy citizens, and they carried weight with Mayor Van Royston. They were of the mayor's own brand of society, for Van Royston had gone into office on a reform ticket.

The same reform ticket that had designated to Mayor Van Royston the appointment of Wildcat Gordon, former army officer, and noted for his roughshod tactics.

Mayor Van Royston immediately began attempting to placate the visitors, assuring De Gron and the others it would be only a matter of minutes until this Paul Brandt and the girl, Eve Willoughby, would be back behind the bars.

"I'm giving Deputy Commissioner Bolton an order to have them picked up at once and brought in," concluded the mayor.

Wildcat's yellow shoes dropped to the floor.

"Gentlemen," he snapped, "Mayor Van Royston means well, but I am in command of this department! Any order given by Henry Bolton contrary to my wishes will get him his instant dismissal! I'm sorry, but that's all the information I'm giving out! Good night!"

It was true, Wildcat reflected thoughtfully, that the youthful Paul Brandt, much to his own bewilderment, had been patched up and discharged from the hospital. He had been asked only to give his word that he would not leave the city.

This inexplicable, incredible procedure on the part of Wildcat Gordon looked as if the fighting commissioner were flouting the law, and going contrary to all principles of common sense. Henry Bolton had his newspaper contacts and within the hour the amazing action of his chief would be first-page news.

Possibly this was exactly what Wildcat Gordon desired to happen. For Paul Brandt was not nearly so much at liberty as he imagined.

At the direction of Detective Sergeant Thorsen, right-hand man to the commissioner, four of the most loyal and dependable detectives of the department had Paul Brandt under surveillance. Sergeant

Thorsen himself had become one of the youth's shadows.

Sergeant Thorsen had been in the army and knew how to take orders to the letter, and carry them out. His was a square face that was wooden in its lack of expression, as wooden and hard as the teak in the deck of a ship.

AS Wildcat Gordon cleared the decks in his own office, Paul Brandt was not the only youth moving furtively through the streets of the big city. The De Gron killer himself had changed into ordinary clothes and was moving casually through an after midnight crowd.

Now the only mark of identification about him was that tight, slanted mouth. He was aware that he had been seen by only two persons on the De Gron estate: Mrs. De Gron and the guard, and both were dead. He had temporarily taken care of Paul Brandt and already he was figuring how the latter could be permanently silenced.

The killer's grin was hard and sinister as he thought of the one other witness. For the murderer was known as "Chuck" Willoughby, and he knew the word of his sister could send him to the chair. Blood might be thick, but her love for Paul Brandt was the real thing.

In Chuck Willoughby's warped brain there was a thought that boded no good for his pretty sister. Well, he would see that neither Paul Brandt nor Eve had a chance to spill what they knew. He reflected smartly and grimly that he was all right as long as Paul Brandt remained alive.

His sister would know that any "squeal" would send Paul along with him to the chair.

Chuck Willoughby touched the heavily wrapped package under his shirt and coat. Except for the little matter of a couple of murders, this whole thing had been a pushover.

"Gee!" he said to himself. "There's maybe two hundred grand in these rocks! If I had 'em all to myself, I could lam!"

Chuck Willoughby had understated the value of the De Gron jewels by about ten times, but he did not know that. But even his own suggestion that he might lam with the plunder caused him to turn a little pale.

The De Gron killer had his reasons for knowing he could not get away with the gems. It was the same reason that now brought him up into the better-class business district, instead of making his way to some underworld hideout. He did not have to seek some tenement street dump and lay low, and he knew it.

That was the appeal of this racket that now was sending him into a midtown business building that housed only the most respectable of firms. Signs on

the office doors were mostly those of real estate companies doing strictly legitimate business.

FIVE minutes after he had entered the front entrance of the big building, Chuck Willoughby was on the ninth floor. At this hour no elevator was in operation, but the De Gron killer arrived at his destination by a back stairway.

The door of an office opened and Chuck Willoughby went on through three inner doors. He swaggered a little, and his hard mouth wore a gloating grin as the final door closed and he was standing on a thick rug of an inner office that showed no windows.

"Well, I guess I got 'em!" said Chuck Willoughby. "An' I guess you heard by this time what happened an' how you can count on me when it comes to a jam! Too bad about the dame but that was an accident!"

Not a single word greeted this boastful outburst, as Chuck Willoughby swaggered over to a chair and cocked a leg over one arm of it. He was facing five men seated around a table. Strangely enough, none of the five men were looking in his direction.

Any of the five at the table might have been what the signs on the business doors indicated, real estate promoters or professional men.

The five faces were smooth, and calm and respectable in appearance. One might have thought that Chuck Willoughby had made a mistake and stumbled into a meeting of some small board of directors.

"Well, ain'tcha goin' to say anything?" sputtered Chuck. "It ain't many of the boys who can pull off this kind of a job, and there ain't a single witness that'll do any talking!"

The five men continued to look at him, and Chuck said, "Oh, I suppose you want to see the rocks? Well, here they are!"

He crossed over to the table, pulled a package from underneath his shirt and the De Gron emeralds, diamonds, pearls and rubies made a small cascade of fire as he dumped them on the table.

"Now ain't they something!" gloated Chuck Willoughby.

The sneering killer looked from one face to another. He knew these men, their names, or he thought he did. The fact was that he did not know the correct name of any man in that room. Neither Chuck Willoughby nor several other younger crooks of his stamp knew the right names.

But that did not matter just now. Something was wrong. Chuck began to sweat a little. None of the men touched the small pile of jewels that represented millions.

Chuck laughed uncertainly. "What is this, anyway? Didn't I pull it off just the way it was staked out?"

THEN a man at the head of the table spoke.

"Too bad the chief isn't here, Willoughby. Perhaps he would appreciate a little murder on the side. Your orders were to get these jewels. When we want a killing, we pay for a killing. Is that clear?"

The speaker had not raised his voice. It had a deadly calmness, as if he were regretfully chiding some child.

"But—but—nobody's seen the chief!" stammered Chuck Willoughby. "I guess I've got as much stuff as any of these triggermen! I guess from now on the chief'll be callin' on me for some of the big jobs!"

The five men now looked at Chuck Willoughby. The man at the head of the table shook his head.

"As I said, Willoughby, you and the other boys know the first principle of your success is to obey an order as given. You were instructed to get these jewels, without violence. You were told not to go armed, so that if you were caught your peculiar disguise would have enabled us to produce a man who would have sworn you were a guest at his house. The whole thing would have been passed over as a joke."

"Well, I guess I'm not dumb!" shouted Chuck Willoughby. "Anyway, I got the stuff, an' I've got my split comin'! An' if you don't like that, what of it?"

The speaker rose slowly. His finger pointed to a narrow door beyond the table. This was almost concealed by a heavy drapery.

"You go in there, Willoughby, for a few moments until we talk this over," the man said. "Of course, you'll get your split. Perhaps, after this, the chief will figure you in on some of the bigger jobs. We hope the chief will not be too much upset."

Chuck Willoughby muttered and walked toward the little door.

"You fellows don't want to try any gougin'," he said. "I've checked on that stuff! I know what it's worth!"

He received no reply from the five men at the table. He opened the little door and went in. In some manner the tight, narrow door seemed to close before Chuck Willoughby could act to touch it.

IN the room he had left, the session at the table became as solemn as a directors' meeting. It was undisturbed by the sudden pounding at the door through

which Chuck Willoughby had gone. The hammering of the De Gron killer's fists, the muffled shouting of his voice—all appeared not to reach the ears of the men outside.

The spokesman said, quietly, "When we want death, we order it. I think we are agreed, and the chief will agree, that we have no further use for a member who cannot obey the rules. Gentlemen, if you are agreed, signify by saying yes."

By some means, possibly a microphone, Chuck Willoughby could hear each word distinctly. The killer had attempted to reopen the closed door. He uttered an amazed oath when he discovered that the door had no knob or latch of any kind on the inner side.

Chuck Willoughby heard the chorus of five men solemnly saying, "Yes."

CHAPTER V
RETURN OF THE KILLERS

CHUCK WILLOUGHBY pounded at the knobless door until his knuckles were bruised and bleeding. As five men chorused, "Yes," the killer pulled out an automatic pistol from inside his shirt.

"Damn alla yuh!" he yelled. "I'll show yuh!"

The automatic slammed bullets into the inner face of the door. The slugs only flattened and glanced off with that high whine which is a note of death itself. The door was bulletproof.

Outside, the spokesman of the five got up quietly and walked over to the wall. His thumb pressed a design in the decoration. There ensued a low hissing like that to be heard in the death cell of a certain state where murderers are executed.

The five men waited no more than a minute.

"That disposes of the case," said the spokesman, calmly. "I will arrange for the rest of it. Good night, gentlemen. I have no doubt the chief will approve."

Four men filed slowly out, but they used an exit which did not lead toward the door fronting on the public corridor. The man left behind set fans going. He moved devices that must have opened powerful ventilators in the room behind the narrow door.

When the man entered this room, Chuck Willoughby was

lying on the floor. The fear on his face was frozen. He had died instantly. There was not even a lingering odor of the deadly gas that had filled the room.

The man closed the door and stepped close to the body; an automatic appeared in one hand. Five bullets were pumped into Chuck Willoughby's body. The man then quietly turned the body over with his foot and took careful aim.

A sixth slug tore its way through Chuck Willoughby's jaws, destroying most of that tight, slanted mouth. Only an extra smart medical examiner could discover a symptom that would set him seeking a cause of death other than the bullets. The mouth and nostrils were a torn mass.

WHEN morning arrived, Wildcat Gordon awoke in his penthouse apartment, fully aware the early editions of the newspapers would be up to their usual game. This was the sensational pastime of putting the police commissioner on the pan.

Wildcat Gordon's rooms were in a penthouse, but this was not in a swanky neighborhood. In fact, it was down by the waterfront, on the high rooftop of an old loft building.

The building was owned by Dick Traeger, a former deputy police commissioner who had been almost a father to Wildcat Gordon. Because of his name and certain quickness of temper and hand, the old retired deputy was more commonly known as "Quick Trigger."

There was one other member of this household high above the waterfront. It was her hand knocking now at Wildcat Gordon's door.

"So you're in it up to your eyes again, Wildcat?" spoke a clear, musical treble. "I've had your coffee waiting an hour, and the morning papers say you've lost your job for good this time and I, for one, am glad of it. Now will you get up?"

Wildcat slid into a bath robe and opened the door. A doll-like figure of a girl stood there, with blue-black curls fluffing around her small ears. Two dancing devils sparkled in her contrary blue eyes, and her red mouth pouted disapproval of Wildcat Gordon.

She was "Tiny" Traeger, granddaughter of old Quick Trigger, and she was twenty-odd. She had been wildly in love with Wildcat since she had been in grammar school, and she would have cut off one of her small, shapely hands before she would have let him know it.

Wildcat accepted a newspaper that had his name in a scarehead; then he closed the door abruptly and rudely in Tiny Traeger's face. The girl kicked the door and cried out, "Army manners again! I hope they kick you out of the department!"

Wildcat started to read the account of his release of Eve Willoughby and Paul Brandt, but he did not

get far. His telephone buzzed sharply.

"There's the devil and all to pay, chief," stated the voice of Detective Sergeant Thorsen. "They've found a dead man sitting against the fence out at the De Gron place, and he's been identified as the brother of that girl Eve Willoughby. A tough egg called Chuck Willoughby."

Wildcat snapped into his clothes, and went down a secret elevator from his dressing room. When Tiny Traeger again pounded on his door, the commissioner was pulling up his fast roadster alongside an entrance to the De Gron estate.

He pushed the knot of coppers aside and found Charles De Gron standing with the medical examiner beside the body of Chuck Willoughby. The mutilated face had been covered.

"Regular mob bump-off, chief," said the medical examiner. "It proves this jewel snatch and the stuff last night was backed by a gang. I'd say this stiff here was the killer. We've checked, and he didn't have brains enough to keep his fingerprints off the bathroom in there."

Wildcat Gordon was looking at the little, gray-haired medical examiner. The police doctor had slowly closed one eyelid; then he walked away.

"Yes," said Charles De Gron heavily. "It seems this winds up this end of it, and I can only feel glad that it is the man who:killed my wife. The fingerprints matched, but somebody wanted to make sure no mistake would be made. Look at these."

DE GRON palmed four jewels. They were a diamond, a pearl, an emerald and a ruby, four of Mrs. De Gron's jewels.

Chuck Willoughby's body had been found sitting rigidly against the fence. Wildcat said nothing, but made a mental note this had been despite the extra police guard that had been placed all night around the big estate.

"This washes it up," said Charles De Gron. "Perhaps you were wise in freeing that other fellow and the girl. But I understand the girl was the sister of Chuck Willoughby. Possibly she was trying to get her brother out of this?"

"Possibly," agreed Wildcat, and went to one side to talk with the gray-haired medical examiner.

The little doctor made a personal report to the commissioner.

"That bullet in the face was meant for a cover-up," he said. "But they'll have to think up something smarter than shooting bullets into a dead man if they expect to fool me."

"You will report," said Wildcat Gordon, "that Chuck Willoughby came to his death by bullet wounds. This is one of the times when it is best for us not to know too much when we don't know quite enough."

Wildcat Gordon missed his morning coffee temporarily. Deputy Henry Bolton came racing down the highway, with Mayor Van Royston in one of the squad cars.

"So you would turn that Paul Brandt loose!" Deputy Bolton shouted. "And they got the Dickson jewelry and the Layton place for a few hundred grand in diamonds!"

Wildcat Gordon said nothing for the moment, chiefly because he was given no opportunity. He contented himself with fingering the fresh carnation in his coat lapel while Mayor Van Royston let off steam.

"And you now have my direct order to pick up this Paul Brandt and that Eve Willoughby and let Henry, here, sweat them until they tell what they know!" shouted Mayor Van Royston. "Yes, Mayor," said Wildcat when he could break in. "When the third-degree method is pulled in my department, I'm seeing that it is applied where it will do the most good. My orders still are to keep hands off Paul Brandt and the girl. Henry, I've thought up a new job for you!"

"What? What?" snapped Henry Bolton. "A new job for me? I don't want—"

"Yes, you do, Henry!" snapped Wildcat. "I'm making you the personal bodyguard of Mayor Van Royston, and you're to see especially that his blood pressure stays down for the next few days!"

Wildcat pivoted on his heels and snapped his fingers to his army hat cocked over one eye. He went over to where the imperturbable Sergeant Thorsen was waiting beside a squad car.

"Sergeant Thorsen, I want you to plaster Lakeside with our reserves for the next week," he commanded. "There will be other robberies. You have the report on Paul Brandt?"

"Right, chief," stated Sergeant Thorsen. "And on one of the other robberies, we've got a description. He was a young fellow in a dress suit. Looks like some gang of kids has busted loose, and they're harder to handle than the old-timers."

"It looks like youngsters," admitted Wildcat. "Too damn much like kids, sergeant. This Chuck Willoughby here isn't more than twenty, and neither is that Paul Brandt."

BEFORE Wildcat Gordon could reach headquarters, still another jewel robbery had broken into the scareheads of the newspapers. This had been a daylight job, and the thief appeared to have walked in among early morning guests and out again, with a cool half million in diamonds.

Wildcat's hard grin denoted that headquarters was probably a spot by now where a hard-pressed police commissioner would not have much opportunity to think. He switched his direction and headed for Quick Trigger's penthouse and his belated morning coffee.

Tiny Traeger sniffed openly at Wildcat when he arrived. She had a morning newspaper spread in front of her. "So you had to take Eve Willoughby home personally, I see by the papers," she said scornfully, "They used to have the police matrons look after the women when grandpa was on the force."

Wildcat forgot his worries in a broad grin, and Tiny slapped coffee into his cup. Old Quick Trigger looked at Wildcat with a worried frown.

Quick Trigger rubbed one hand over his polished dome and touched the tufts of gray hair still lingering over his ears. He peered at Wildcat from faded blue eyes that seemed nearsighted, but were remarkably keen.

"Reckon you didn't do so good, Wildcat, turnin' that pair loose an' these robberies out in Lakeside pilin' up on top of it," sighed Quick Trigger. "There'll be hell to pay with his honor, an' you might as well go down to headquarters or plug up that danged phone."

"If you'll have your grandchild run along out into the kitchen and wash up the dishes like she should, I'll tell you something," stated Wildcat.

Tiny Traeger's perky nose went up a couple of notches as she marched out of the room.

"Quick Trigger," said Wildcat, "I wouldn't be surprised if we have a whole epidemic of robberies, and maybe another murder or two thrown in. And how would you like me to use my influence to get you a swell job as a janitor?"

"You thinkin' of goin' crazy again, Wildcat?"

"He doesn't have to think of it!" snapped Tiny from the kitchen door. "And suppose you take your army feet off my table!"

Wildcat dropped his shoes from the corner of the table, got up and closed the door in Tiny's face. When he came back, Quick Trigger said, "You ain't thinkin' of The Whisperer, are you, Wildcat? Danged if I don't wish I'd never made those dental plates."

Wildcat dropped his voice and spoke rapidly.

"I'm thinking of you taking that janitor's job, and I've an idea there ought to be some profit in having a pushcart, Quick Trigger. Yes, I'm afraid The Whisperer is about to reappear."

OLD Quick Trigger scratched his bald head. It was no mystery to him that Wildcat Gordon himself was The Whisperer, that archfoe of crooks and the despair of the police department.

Quick Trigger himself had devised the old dental plates that helped transform the good-looking police commissioner into a gray figure of mystery.

But as for becoming a janitor, and there being profit in a pushcart, old Quick Trigger had yet to be informed what wild idea had come upon Wildcat.

"It's like this, Quick Trigger," Wildcat said. "I had

Paul Brandt shadowed and I know several places he went to after being turned loose. He returned to one building three times, but apparently did not find what he was seeking. Now Paul Brandt has pulled a smart one and fooled my best dicks."

"Gone, Wildcat?"

"Like that, Quick Trigger. Maybe he's smarter than I took him to be. But that isn't all of it. Right now, this Paul Brandt and his sweetheart, Eve Willoughby, are on the spot. I wasn't sure of it until they found Chuck Willoughby full of lead poison, fed to him after he was dead."

Quick Trigger emitted a low whistle. "Every time you go crazy, Wildcat, there's a method behind it. I'd think his honor would begin to learn that."

"Not as long as Henry Bolton's got the itch for my job," said Wildcat. "Now here's the layout, Quick Trigger: I believe Paul Brandt is smart enough to keep in the clear, except for one thing. That's his sweetheart. They'll be rubbed out at the same time, if we don't block it. You've got the address of Eve Willoughby, and it's a tough hang-out down there."

"Dang it, Wildcat, I don't like it! I take this janitor's job then, and keep in touch. Right?"

"You've named it, Quick Trigger. No doubt the p.m. papers will have it that the police commissioner has quit and left town under fire."

Wildcat suddenly came erect. He crossed the room in two silent strides and threw open the kitchen door. Tiny Traeger was over by the kitchen sink, busy with the dishes. She puckered her mouth without turning her head.

Wildcat was not fast enough for the dancing Tiny. Less than ten seconds before she had had one small ear pressed to the keyhole of the door. She intended to know all about this Eve Willoughby person.

As Wildcat had predicted, police headquarters was buzzing. Hours had passed and night had come, but the jaunty police commissioner had failed to appear. Goaded by Mayor Van Royston, Deputy Henry Bolton had an order out for the arrest of Paul Brandt, and would have sent out for Eve Willoughby but discovered he lacked the girl's address in the thickest human hives of the tenement district.

Eve Willoughby's address was Wildcat Gordon's own secret.

CHAPTER VI
THE PEDDLER IN GRAY

THE narrow tenement street was like a shadowed, slitted canyon. Its buildings reared to ten and twelve stories, human hives filled with thousands of the poorest class of citizens.

The thronged thoroughfare was called Argos Street. Eve Willoughby occupied a front room with a small kitchen on the third floor of a tenement in the middle of the block. Evidence of the girl's own moral honesty apparently was shown by the humble residence in the slums.

Eve Willoughby could look down into the cluttered street. The pushcart business thrived in this block. Dozens of peddlers of different nationalities and colors hawked everything from fruit and roasted chestnuts to small notions and clothing.

A new pushcart had appeared along the row, and it was backed up to the sidewalk directly under Eve Willoughby's window. Other peddlers might be picturesque, but this one was inconspicuous in any detail.

The man was not large, and he seemed smaller because of the gray clothing in which he was clad, topped off by a round-brimmed gray hat. His hair was a mere whitish blur that harmonized with the hat, and his oddly shaped face was of the kind that showed no emotion.

The eyes under the edge of the hat were almost without color, light-blue or gray, and cold. They were Texas eyes that seemed to observe little, but missed nothing.

For this peddler was The Whisperer. His chin was queerly pointed, and his upper lip was long over his square mouth.

Clever dental plates—the creation of old Quick Trigger—were responsible for the contour of the features. None among the city's millions could have identified this peddler in gray with the usually flamboyant figure of Police Commissioner Wildcat Gordon. Because of this startling contrast afforded by The Whisperer, the police commissioner had made it his custom to wear clothes of almost violent loudness. Other hawkers were crying their wares. The Whisperer spoke only when some children purchased of the fruit with which his pushcart was loaded. He employed a low, husky tone, hardly more than a murmur.

When The Whisperer raised his voice, the odd dental plates cut off his words to hissing whispers. If he attempted to speak loudly, the result was his eerie, penetrating whisper. He used it only in moments when it would strike the most fear, bring the greatest results.

THE WHISPERER had been beside his loaded pushcart perhaps an hour when he first saw Eve Willoughby's pretty face pressed against the third-floor window. The girl was looking out into the street below.

With the first appearance of the girl, a slickly clad youth who had been loitering in front of a cigar stand across the street raised one hand and pushed back his cap.

His face was young and hard. So was the countenance of another man, who had seated himself on the stoop of the tenement adjoining that in which Eve Willoughby resided.

This seated young man moved his head quickly, glancing upward and drawing the back of a hand across his chin. Both men remained motionless after that, but The Whisperer had caught the furtive signal. He knew that his guess had been correct.

These two young men were spotting Eve Willoughby's room. A black sedan, a bit too sleek and polished to be in Argos Street, was driven slowly past. The Whisperer was aware this was the third time within the hour the same car had driven by his pushcart.

The driver was another young man with a hard face. There appeared to be no person occupying the rear seat, but the car's curtains were drawn.

The Whisperer doled out some apples to two grimy children and took their pennies. He wanted to refuse the money, but pushcart men do not conduct a charitable business. The sleek sedan disappeared, moving slowly around the nearest corner.

The driver had raised one hand. The man on the stoop had pushed a hand above his head.

The Whisperer knew a murder trap had been set. Perhaps the actual killing was not intended to take place in the crowded street, but Eve Willoughby was on the spot. The watchers, no doubt, were only waiting the girl's appearance outside.

Possibly she would be suddenly pushed into that slowly cruising sedan. She might make an outcry, but incidents like that attracted little attention in

Argos Street. Its more unsavory residents did not care to be involved with any matter that might bring too much attention from the police.

Eve Willoughby was not under police surveillance. The Whisperer relied only upon himself. His best men had been tricked and lost by Paul Brandt.

Sooner or later, the young man with the broken wrist would seek Eve Willoughby. Likely, he was too smart to attempt to use a telephone, fearing he would be traced.

The girl's face disappeared from the window. The Whisperer seemed to be putting some figures in a book. He scribbled a note, then tore out the page. A grimy street urchin had been gazing longingly at the apples.

The Whisperer called the small boy, gave him a big apple and told him to give that note to the woman in the front third-floor room. The boy darted into the building, and a minute later Eve Willoughby looked out of the window with a puzzled searching of the street.

She held the note that said :

> DON'T LEAVE YOUR ROOMS FOR ANY REASON. IF YOU CAN CONTACT PAUL BRANDT, WARN HIM NOT TO COME HERE. BOTH OF YOU ARE ON THE SPOT. ADMIT NO ONE TO YOUR ROOMS UNLESS IT IS THE POLICE.

The Whisperer noted Eve Willoughby was looking at him, at his pushcart. The small boy, no doubt, had told her who had given him the note. Possibly the girl would attempt to communicate with him.

But Eve Willoughby did not have that chance. The Whisperer busied himself swiftly with the fruit on his cart. The young man had moved suddenly from the nearby stoop. The other man was coming across the street from the cigar stand.

A taxicab had halted at the end of the block and another young fellow with a brimmed hat concealing his face was hurrying along the sidewalk. This man's right hand was shoved into his shirt, where the edge of a white bandage showed.

PAUL BRANDT was taking a desperate chance to see Eve Willoughby. He must have known he was risking death, for his head turned furtively as he eyed both sides of the street sharply. Suddenly he saw the man crossing from the cigar stand.

The Whisperer saw Paul Brandt hesitate in his stride, then move closer to the buildings and come on more slowly. The youth's uninjured hand went into a side pocket of his coat.

The Whisperer had one hand buried underneath the apples on his pushcart. Both of the men shadowing Eve Willoughby's place were under his colorless eyes.

For that reason, he did not see the return of the slick sedan until its rubber squealed around the corner back of him as it came tearing down the narrow street.

At the same instant the sedan sped through the center lane of the crowded street, the two young men who had been watching turned and hurried rapidly out of the block. The suddenly roaring progress of the automobile turned all eyes in that direction.

None of the scores in the street, the other pushcart men, saw The Whisperer shove two children down into a basement stairway, and then drop behind his own pushcart. Even in that rising crescendo of sound, a weird, high whisper penetrated to the ears of Paul Brandt—a hissed warning.

Paul Brandt saw the rocketing sedan, and he heard the eerie warning. He dived forward, flattening on the sidewalk as a continuous streak of pale fire leaped from the rear of the flying car.

Over Paul Brandt's body the red wall of the brick tenement was splattered with gray, while glancing slugs screamed over terrified peddlers and running children.

Pushcart men dived under their vehicles; children tumbled into basement doorways. Paul Brandt rolled over closer to the wall; it was apparent at least one slug had nicked him.

None then saw the jumping smaller line of flame that came from the vicinity of The Whisperer's cart. Many did see the driver of the sedan rear suddenly from his seat until his head must have collided with the roof. He toppled over forward and his weight spun the car's wheel abruptly.

The sedan luckily crossed a cleared space in the sidewalk and jammed its nose on the steps of a building before it overturned, and spilled two men from the rear.

The motor was driven from its mounting back into the front seat and the driver became an inanimate bundle of mutilated flesh and broken bones.

A machine gun fell and bounced along the sidewalk, but the two men in the rear of the car were apparently unhurt. Both sped away and vanished around the first corner before the shouting and screaming of those in the street had begun to die away.

There had been a diving rush of everyone in the street to get out of possible range of the gang's "chopper." But now there was the usual reaction, as it was seen that the driver of the sedan had been crushed and his companions had fled.

Flames curled suddenly from underneath the car's hood and a small, blasting explosion enveloped the dead man in the front seat with fire. The blaze halted the line of curious people in the middle of the street.

NONE had eyes for The Whisperer, the little gray peddler. And none saw the strange pistol in his hand thrust back underneath a pile of apples. That weapon had made no sound that could have been heard above the noise of the machine gun. It had been no more than a hissing, like the slow release of compressed air.

Having disposed of his silenced pistol, The Whisperer moved fast. He lifted Paul Brandt's limp body without effort and carried him over to his loaded pushcart. A door at the end of the cart opened, revealing a compartment concealed under the piled fruit.

As Paul Brandt was pushed from view, a furry, black dog with beady eyes whined a little and looked into The Whisperer's face.

"Quiet, Brian Boru!" commanded the eerie whisper. "Watch him!"

The dog was a Scottish terrier. His obedience to the order denoted almost human intelligence. The dog bared his white fangs and curled into a corner beside the unconscious Paul Brandt. The end of the pushcart closed and The Whisperer left it and moved with the others toward the flaming sedan.

CHAPTER VII
THE WHISPERER'S TRICK

"ONE of them pushcart men was shootin' at the car!"

This was the excited voice of a fat woman from one of the tenements. She was talking volubly with hands and tongue. Coppers of two squad cars surrounded her, and they demanded to know which one of the pushcart men had been shooting.

The fat woman could not be positive. The block had been hemmed in by police lines. No person was permitted to leave or enter that block of Argos Street. The Whisperer had mingled with others of the pushcart men. Any possible identification of the driver of the sedan had been destroyed. He was only a charred body but The Whisperer knew that in a short time it would be found that there were at least two bullets through his burned skull. The Whisperer moved away and stood beside his cart.

Brian Boru's beady eyes peered at him through a crack in the compartment of the pushcart. A police inspector and three men from the Fortieth Street precinct station were passing down the line of peddlers. They were hurriedly searching each man.

The fat woman still insisted she had seen a pushcart man shooting, but none in the street seemed to remember Paul Brandt, at whom the machine gun had been aimed. The attention of all had been at the moment too strictly fixed upon getting out of the pathway of flying bullets.

The red-faced inspector and his men halted beside The Whisperer's cart. "You're a new one in the block, ain't yuh?" snapped one of the coppers, his big hands playing over The Whisperer's clothes. "Don't remember ever seein' yuh before."

The strained face of Eve Willoughby showed near the third-floor window. It was apparent to The Whisperer that she must have seen Paul Brandt and knew that at this moment her sweetheart was in the bottom of the pushcart. If she would only be wise enough to keep out of this, and accept The Whisperer as a friend.

The girl remained near the window. The copper again prodded the peddler in the gray clothes.

"I said you was a new one!" he rapped out. "We'll take a look at your peddler's license!"

This was a contingency The Whisperer had not foreseen. Half the peddlers on the street lacked licenses. But it was a convenience for the police to be able to demand the certificate.

"I was gettin' a license this morning," said The Whisperer, in his low, husky tone. "I'll be goin' up to the city hall right away."

"We'll see about that!" snapped the red-faced inspector. "I'm thinkin' maybe a new hawker might know more about this blastin' than he's tellin'! Take him along in!"

The Whisperer protested with gesturing hands. Two coppers shoved him roughly before the handle of his pushcart. A stick prodded his ribs and the gray peddler was compelled to start his loaded wagon along the street, toward the precinct station three blocks from Argos Street.

THE very mildness of The Whisperer prevented arousing suspicion that he was other than just a pushcart man without a license. As the gray peddler, he managed to maintain such an air of stolid dumbness as to convince the two coppers accompanying him that he had been no more than a witness to the Argos Street gunning.

"Leave your cart out in front, an' maybe you can fix up the license with the sergeant," said one of the coppers.

The other policeman grumbled and stayed outside to keep an eye on the contents of the small fruit wagon. The Whisperer chuckled inwardly as this copper selected a big red apple and started munching it.

"Help yourself to a couple," said The Whisperer to the other policeman. "Take one along in to the sergeant." The cop grinned, took two apples and said, "Tryin' to bribe us, huh? Well, you don't look like a bad fellow, so maybe the sergeant will let you off easy."

The coppers did not know they had lifted apples only a few inches from two of the deadliest,

silenced automatics ever invented. The Whisperer could see the shoe-button eyes of Brian Boru glistening almost beside the knees of the copper staying on guard.

Going into the precinct station was a long gamble. At any instant, Paul Brandt might recover consciousness and move or groan. The Whisperer's identity and his relation to Wildcat Gordon had never been closer to being smashed. But there was still no movement inside the pushcart compartment. The coppers had not been pushing the vehicle, so they had not known of its extra weight. The Whisperer went inside the precinct station.

"You wait in here, fellow," ordered the copper with him. "I'll give the sergent the apple, an' tell him about you. Don't make any breaks, or we'll confiscate your whole load!"

THE door closed and The Whisperer was alone in a small side room where visitors waited to see prisoners. His good nature and willingness to come along had allayed the suspicion of the two coppers, and for the moment he knew he was regarded as unimportant in the Argos Street shooting.

As the door closed, The Whisperer's hands moved swiftly. The dental plates came from his mouth and the round-brimmed hat disappeared. Concealed zippers moved on his shoes and his gray clothes underwent a swift transformation.

The copper with the two apples was in front of the sergeant's desk. He said, "He's a little guy without a license, but he sent you an apple, sarge! Guess he's O.K., but the inspector is up in the air."

"And you fellas take time out to eat apples and fool around with some pushcart peddler!" snapped a crisp voice behind him. "I want every man in the precinct to stake out that block in Argos Street and stick there until further orders! I'll send Sergeant Thorsen down with a detail from headquarters! Now how in hell did the mug they were gunning for get out of that block?"

The sergeant and patrolman gasped and snapped to attention. Commissioner Wildcat Gordon stood there, his army hat pulled to a belligerent angle over one eye.

"I don't know—nobody knows," stammered the patrolman. "We just brought in a pushcart man, and maybe he could tell you something. I'll get him."

The copper pushed open the door of the side room and swore.

"If you mean a little fellow in a gray suit, I passed him walking out the front entrance as I came in!" roared Wildcat. "Now get out and bring him back!" The copper muttered and went out with Wildcat Gordon at his heels.

"You, too!" rapped Wildcat at the copper guarding the pushcart. "If you hadn't been too busy eating

his apples, you'd have seen that peddler make his getaway! Now get out with your buddy and pick him up before he gets out of the neighborhood!"

The copper on guard gaped at Wildcat Gordon. He did not want to admit he had not seen the commissioner enter the station. The pair of sorely puzzled patrolmen pounded their heels toward the nearest corner and were glad indeed to escape the cold eyes of the commissioner.

WILDCAT GORDON stood beside the pushcart of The Whisperer. He could hear a feeble moaning from inside. Brian Boru whined. The smart Scottish terrier knew Wildcat, yet there was something about the man with the red necktie and the carnation in his coat lapel the dog resented. He was devoted to The Whisperer.

"Might cause some comment for the police commissioner to be seen pushing a peddler's cart down the street," murmured Wildcat, with a whimsical grin. "But it wouldn't be so hot either to have Paul Brandt pulled out of the compartment."

An aged man came along, sandwiched between two advertising boards. Wildcat had a quick idea. He summoned the old fellow and produced a dollar.

"Trundle this pushcart over to Forty-eighth and Royal Street," he directed, "and the peddler who owns it will come along. He's a little fellow wearing gray clothes and talks hoarsely. If you don't take it there, I'll have you brought in." The old sandwich man had to carry his heavy boards two days for a dollar. He obeyed with alacrity when he saw the money. With his boards banging his legs, he pushed the fruit vehicle down the street and disappeared.

Wildcat went back into the precinct station. He got Sergeant Thorsen on the telephone.

"You're being fired again, chief," stated the wooden voice of Sergeant Thorsen.

"It's a habit, and it pleases the mayor," commented Wildcat. "Now put Mahoney on this address alone, and tell him to stick there until he hears from me."

Mahoney was one of Wildcat's most trusted detectives. Sergeant Thorsen was then given Eve Willoughby's address. He could be trusted implicitly.

"There has been another jewel robbery out in Lakeside," said Sergeant Thorsen. "The Bellew place, and they got away with a hundred grand in diamonds and other junk."

"I had expected that," said Wildcat, dryly. "There will be others. Henry will be kept busy."

"He has half the force out looking for Paul Brandt and Eve Willoughby," said Sergeant Thorsen.

"Give him my regards, and I hope he has luck," stated Wildcat.

LESS than ten minutes later, the inconspicuous figure of the gray peddler appeared beside his pushcart at Forty-eighth and Royal Streets. The old sandwich man looked at him suspiciously and mumbled, "You take it away, buddy. I don't want nothin' to do with it. I just found out there's a dead man an' a dog inside."

The Whisperer slipped him another dollar, and the sandwich man waddled away, glancing back over a shoulder. That had been close. It was lucky that Paul Brandt had not fully regained consciousness.

The Whisperer followed a series of alleys that led toward one of the city's toughest districts. He arrived at the rear of a block that seemed to house only basement barrooms and brothels, with many shuttered windows in the buildings above.

There were furtive eyes watching the alley when The Whisperer backed the pushcart into an areaway. No doubt they saw the body of a man who might have been dead pulled from the compartment under the fruit. But the owners of these eyes only grunted and made note to carefully forget anything they had seen.

This was not a neighborhood in which it was healthy to speak of what one might see in an alley. The Whisperer got Paul Brandt over one shoulder, had the pushcart hidden under a shed and went up a backstairs, trailed by Brian Boru.

When Paul Brandt got his eyes open, a wet cloth had been bound around a bullet wound that had creased his scalp. He was sitting in a chair, and a little gray man with a pointed chin and long upper lip was watching him.

Paul Brandt started to arise and said, "Where am I? What's all this? There was shooting and—"

He ceased speaking and dropped back into the chair. The black Scottish terrier had snarled viciously and snapped white fangs close to his ankles. The gray man addressed him in a husky, murmuring voice. Paul Brandt saw that iron shutters were drawn over windows of a nearly barren, unkept room.

"Don't worry now about where you are," said The Whisperer. "You're lucky you're not dead, and your sweetheart along with you. Anyway, the mugs who were gunning for you made a snatch and took Eve Willoughby away. I saved you, and I want to know what it's all about?"

Paul Brandt grew pale, and his voice trembled. But he stubbornly refused to give an explanation.

"You're fooling me!" he cried out. "You're one of them! I know, for some of you got Chuck Willoughby! You're only tryin' to see if I'll squeal!"

The Whisperer insisted he was the youth's friend—the friend of Eve Willoughby.

"If you want your sweetheart to live, you had better tell me all you know," he said. "You'll not leave here until you talk and give me a line on the men behind all this. I'm the only living person who can save Eve Willoughby."

The Whisperer had unconsciously raised his voice and now it had become a weird, penetrating hiss. Paul Brandt's eyes widened with fear.

"I know you!" gasped the youth. "You're The Whisperer! They are afraid of you, more than of the cops! I heard them talking!"

"I'm The Whisperer!" came the eerie voice. "I'll save Eve Willoughby and you, but in return you must do me a favor. You will stay here until I know you are to be trusted."

"What do you want?" said Paul Brandt.

The Whisperer came to the point immediately.

"You know something perhaps of the Charles De Gron collection of jewels," he said. "Not those taken from his wife, but the exhibition stones. I want those rocks, and I'm going to have them. There are men behind you and this mob that want to rub you out before you talk too much. Tell me what you know, and I'll get you and your sweetheart safely out of this."

SWEAT was pouring from Paul Brandt's forehead. It was plain to see that he was laboring under the stress of a double fear. Fear of The Whisperer with his cool announcement that he intended to steal the Charles De Gron jewels, and fear of those whom The Whisperer sought to know.

Before he could speak, The Whisperer added some information. He told Paul Brandt he knew where he had gone when he had left the hospital, and he must know why he went there.

Paul Brandt's lips were gray and stiff, as he started to talk.

"You've never heard of the school for murder?" he began.

"Tell me all you know about the school for murder," said The Whisperer.

Paul Brandt talked, hoarsely, telling an incredible story.

When he had finished, The Whisperer said, "Brian Boru will see that you stay here. If even a small part of this is the truth, you and Eve Willoughby will be protected."

CHAPTER VIII
THE JEWELS COME HOME

WILDCAT GORDON walked into police headquarters as coolly as if he had just come from his morning shower and knew nothing of a machine gun's thunder in Argos Street, or major jewel robberies in the Lakeside district that now totaled five.

"I tell you, Mayor Van Royston," came Deputy Henry Bolton's high-pitched voice, "it's all come about through Gordon turnin' Paul Brandt and that moll of his loose! It's inside work, that's what it is, an' with the Bellew rocks they've made the biggest cleanup this department has ever faced!"

Wildcat Gordon heard this as he opened the door of his office. His concise, calm voice came with a surprise to the group inside.

"For once, Henry, you're being smart, and I'm inclined to agree with you," he stated. "All the robberies show inside cooperation, so I suppose you've got most of the house servants from all of those places under lock and key?"

"Why—why—" Deputy Bolton was sputtering.

"You're back?" suddenly raged the stiff-necked Mayor Van Royston, strutting over to Wildcat Gordon's desk. "Where've you been, and how long do you propose to do nothing about all of this, Gordon? These gentlemen demand instant action, and the party committee is looking into it!"

"When the party committee begins looking into things, then we are getting somewhere, mayor," said Wildcat, cheerfully, erecting his yellow shoes to one corner of his big desk and flicking a finger over a fresh carnation. "As for these gentlemen—Mr. De Gron and the others—what have they to suggest?" There were a dozen of the gentlemen mentioned by the mayor. Headed by Charles De Gron, they were representatives of Lakeside. Among them were four men who had suffered losses of jewelry running into high figures.

CHARLES DE GRON walked over to Wildcat's desk. The short, white scar under his black hair turned slowly red.

The man still presented a solemn appearance, but it was evident he was mad all the way through.

"I thought when these thieves got my wife's murderer, there must be a deep reason behind the killing, Commissioner Gordon," he said heavily. "The robbery of my friends and the evidence that a big gang is at work leaves no conclusion but that your police department as now conducted is helpless. I would go so far as to say you have effectively tied the hands of your own men so that they have no leads."

"Yes, yes, Mr. De Gron!" interposed Deputy Bolton, screwing his small mouth into a pleased sneer. "We ain't even been allowed to know the address of that dame Eve Willoughby, an' this mobster Paul Brandt was let slip right through our hands!"

Only one of Wildcat's colorless Texas eyes was visible under his cocked army hat. He surveyed the tall figure of Charles De Gron without speaking.

That noted collector and representative citizen

of Lakeside would have been shocked speechless to know that the silent police commissioner was at this moment trying to recall just when it was that De Gron had announced an exhibition of his jewel collection at the state museum.

Wildcat wondered absently what would be the reaction of all these stiff-necked residents of exclusive Lakeside if they could read his mind and learn that he was even now concocting a plan whereby the famous De Gron jewels would disappear from that museum.

Mayor Van Royston said, curtly, "Well, Commissioner Gordon, you're not saying much for once! These gentlemen have asked that I take steps to remedy the serious defects in your department!"

"Hellamighty, mayor!" grinned Wildcat pleasantly. "You're not suggesting I get rid of Henry, are you?" Deputy Bolton swore wildly, and Mayor Van Royston puffed up his chest and declared he did not intend to be affronted by his commissioner.

He was still declaring this, backed up by the muttered approval of the Lakeside visitors, when the telephone buzzed and the operator stated an outside party was trying to contact Charles De Gron. "Yes?" said De Gron. "The Independent? What? Rotha? He's got them? Yes. Sure. I'll do that. I'll authorize the release."

The others were silent, listening to the one-sided conversation. Charles De Gron turned from the telephone. He started to say something, when Wildcat Gordon interrupted.

"Rotha and the Independent Insurance Co., huh? How much do you have to authorize as a reward, De Gron?" The tall man from Lakeside stared at Wildcat.

"Yes, Detective Rotha and the Independent," he said. "But how do you know what I was told?"

"You tell us," suggested Wildcat. "It's happened before, with the same Detective Rotha. He's run onto the fence that's got your wife's jewels and, on a promise of immunity, he's bringing the stuff back for a certain stated amount. So that's why he contracted you through the insurance company."

"If you know as much as all that, then why haven't your police got at this thing?" snapped De Gron. "The jewels have been returned, and for a trivial sum—twenty-five thousand dollars to be exact."

Wildcat slapped his yellow shoes to the floor. Rage filled his voice.

"All right, De Gron, you've got your junk back, and so you're probably satisfied on that end! Maybe the rest of you will have the same luck, and maybe you won't! You want to know why the police don't get at these things? Detective Rotha is one of the answers, and if you'll excuse me, I think I shall have some conversation with Mr. Rotha."

"But you can't —"

Wildcat did not wait for the rest of De Gron's protest. His shoes pounded out of headquarters. Less than half an hour later, he stepped from his car in a business neighborhood where the offices graded down in the profession to the class of shyster lawyers and a questionable variety of private detectives. Wildcat took long, angry strides along a bare-floored hallway toward a stained glass window at the end. The sign on the window read: "A. Rotha, Private Investigator." The door apparently was locked and a little sign said A. Rotha was "out for lunch."

One of Wildcat's fists smashed into the stained glass. A. Rotha was not out for lunch, for the splintering of the glass caused the door to fly open. A short man with bushy eyebrows and thick lips stood in front of Wildcat Gordon.

This man grinned mockingly, and said, "Hello, Commissioner! We were expectin' you! The court has issued a writ, and so you've had your little trip for your pains!"

THE thick-lipped man was Mark Mora, a lawyer of the crookedest shyster type. He was thrusting a paper with a gilt seal on it toward Wildcat Gordon.

"You got a damn quick tipoff, didn't you, Mora?" grated Wildcat and smashed a square fist into the man's mocking lips at the same time. "Now get out of my way!" he added, and then hit the lawyer with his other set of knuckles.

Blood flew from the man's split lips as his heels left the floor. The gilt-sealed writ fell to the floor and Wildcat ground it under one yellow shoe, as he crossed the office toward an inner door.

This door opened and a big man with shoe-button eyes confronted the commissioner. He was bigger than Wildcat, broader and five inches taller.

"So you ain't smart enough to keep your hands off, Gordon!" he said, from one corner of his mouth. "That little trick of yours just now is going to cost you plenty! This time I'm backed up by the law, the insurance people and your own boss, Mayor Van Royston! He just telephoned you were to call him when you got here!"

"That's nice of the mayor!" grated Wildcat, and then one hand flew out so suddenly it put Detective Rotha's long nose over to one side before he could duck. "Come here!" rasped Wildcat, hooking a thumb under the private dick's collar and snapping him sidewise into the jam of the door.

Detective Rotha was big and tough. He knew a certain science of in-fighting, but if he had ever before experienced Wildcat's explosive rage, he never would have made the mistake of kicking him on one shin. It was a forceful kick and brought a groaning oath from Wildcat.

Then Detective Rotha's inside private office began to go to pieces. Wildcat slammed the bigger man into a wooden filing case and shattered it. Papers spewed on the floor as Wildcat nailed Rotha's head to the splintered cabinet and bumped it.

Rotha swung and jolted Wildcat's chin and mouth, throwing him loose. Wildcat went flat on his back, but ripped both feet upward and sent Rotha over his head, as the private dick tried to follow up his advantage.

They got to their feet together. A typewriter and an adding machine were added to the wreckage in the next couple of minutes. Wildcat fastened his hands on Rotha's throat and rocked his head.

Mark Mora, the lawyer, got up from the floor outside and looked in, then got on the telephone. Apparently he did not care for personal interference.

Before Mark Mora dropped the telephone, Detective Rotha was lying on the floor, with his eyes closed. Wildcat Gordon was making again for the outer office. Mora could not reach the outside door without being observed, so he crouched and hid himself behind a desk.

SEEING that the outer room appeared empty, Wildcat went back and slapped a glass of water into Rotha's face. As the detective opened his eyes, Wildcat said, "You're telling me all about where you found the De Gron jewels, and every time I think you're lying I'm going to flatten your nose some more!"

Rotha swore and attempted to rise, but discovered Wildcat was not bluffing. Blood gushed into his mouth. The second time Wildcat hit him, he broke.

"You've gotta keep me out of it, Gordon!" he whimpered. "You gotta see they don't get me! I've been meanin' to go straight, an' I'll take this twenty-five G's an' lam! You cover me until I'm in the clear, an' I'll tell you!"

Neither man heard Mark Mora crawling from the outside office. The thick-lipped lawyer's eyes were glinting. He had heard Rotha's whimpering statement he would tell. Apparently, Mark Mora believed others should have that information before it might be too late.

Detective Rotha told nothing more. Wildcat Gordon jerked him to his feet, jammed him into a chair, then said, "Never mind the details, Rotha. I know more now than you could tell me. I just wanted to be sure you had hooked the insurance company into this. Just don't let me hear from you again; and be sure to be out of town the next time I call!"

Wildcat walked from the office and back along the corridor. He had no means of knowing by that departure without a witness, he would soon be

facing a murder charge, with every circumstance putting the finger upon him.

THE tempest of Mayor Royston's complaint still raged at headquarters when Wildcat Gordon walked in. Charles De Gron and his friends had departed, leaving the threat of seeking action against Commissioner Gordon unless results were to be had in the other jewel robberies.

"This shooting in Argos Street, Gordon?" said Mayor Van Royston. "We have a report that a man resembling this Paul Brandt was seen there."

"No doubt, Henry will soon clear up the shooting, mayor," said Wildcat Gordon. "Have you thought about what should be done with private detectives who protect thieves and fences, and bargain with insurance companies for payoffs?"

"If De Gron is satisfied, that's what counts," stated Mayor Van Royston. "It would be well if the other jewels could be found as easily."

"Sure!" snapped Wildcat. "It would be soft for the jewel-theft racket, you mean! With a few ratty dicks like this Rotha, we could close up shop in the department and let the merry game of easy extortion sail right along! It would be a good thing for the city if Rotha and all of his kind were exterminated!"

Wildcat and others were to recall these words in a very short time. In the meantime, Wildcat got a phone connection with the Independent Insurance Co. Mayor Van Royston and Deputy Bolton were listening.

"So, you've agreed to pay Detective Rotha twenty-five grand on the De Gron jewels, and no questions asked?" said Wildcat into the phone.

An insurance official said, "That was the agreement, but we have the check here. Rotha was to have called for it an hour ago. He hasn't showed up."

"Take my advice and hold that check!" rapped Wildcat. "Perhaps Rotha won't call, and De Gron has got his wife's jewels! Someday this department is going after you people for compounding felonies! We know you save money on payoffs, but you make it tough for honest citizens!"

Mayor Van Royston and Deputy Bolton were staring at Wildcat.

"What made you say Rotha wouldn't collect his check, Gordon?" inquired the sneering voice of Henry Bolton.

"I think Rotha may have to be patched up a bit first," said Wildcat Gordon, cheerfully. "A little accident happened to him. I venture to say Detective Rotha is one dick who is through conniving with thieves and fences for a soft take on robberies."

AT that moment Mark Mora, the shyster lawyer, came bustling into Wildcat's office, accompanied by two court deputies.

"Well, Mr. Gordon," said the lawyer, "we've come to have you produce Detective Rotha. You have no grounds for locking him up, and I've got a court order for his release."

Wildcat grinned pleasantly at Mark Mora.

"Isn't that too bad now, Mora? You've got papers for Detective Rotha, and I haven't got him in my pocket. I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere for your friend. Possibly he has left the city for a long, long time."

Mark Mora said, "You can't stall me, Gordon! I've got the papers, and you'll produce Rotha at once or I'll—"

Wildcat's feet thudded to the floor. In one jump, he was facing Mark Mora and the deputies.

"The glass in my office door has been replaced several times on account of shyster mouthpieces going through it, Mora! You can take your deputies and your papers and get out of my office! Rotha isn't locked up and probably never will be! He—"

The phone on Wildcat's desk had buzzed. Deputy Bolton had replied. His unpleasant voice spoke excitedly.

"So that's it? They've found Detective Rotha! The report says he was beaten to a pulp an' probably thrown out of a car in a downtown alley!"

Mayor Van Royston stared with widening eyes at Wildcat Gordon. He had never become accustomed to Wildcat's roughshod tactics, but on the other hand there had been no evidence of a third-

degree going beyond the limit, even with Wildcat.

"So, it's murder!" howled Mark Mora. "And that puts a different face on things, Mr. Commissioner! I heard you beating him up, and when I went back to his office, Rotha was gone! So you took him away in your car, and I suppose—"

Mark Mora's supposition ceased to be audible, due to Wildcat's bunched knuckles catching him flush on the chin. Wildcat swung on Henry Bolton and Sergeant Thorsen, who was sitting at his desk.

"Come on!" he ordered. "I want to see Rotha's body before anything happens to it!"

"I'm charging you with murder!" squawked Mark Mora from the floor. "You may be commissioner, but you can't beat this kind of a rap!"

Wildcat ignored this and two minutes later the squad cars were swinging downtown.

Detective Rotha's puffed, swollen countenance left no doubt he had been severely beaten. The condition was such that the gray-haired medical examiner shook his head and said, "Might discover a skull fracture, chief. Somebody did a good job on him."

Mark Mora had trailed along and was talking with Mayor Van Royston. The medical examiner had a word aside with Wildcat.

"It's hydrocyanic gas again, chief," he said, quietly. "The same as killed that Chuck Willoughby. Shall I make the report and clean it up?"

"No," stated Wildcat. "Let it ride for the inquest."

CHAPTER IX
TINY'S SAD MISTAKE

"YOU'VE got me stumped, chief," said the gray-haired medical examiner, in a low voice. "I could prevent them from charging you with murder."

"I said we'd let it ride," replied Wildcat. "Perhaps dodging a murder charge might be convenient. I'll be seeing you, doc."

Wildcat Gordon was in his own coupé and away before Mayor Van Royston and the others suspected his intention. Wildcat was well aware it would be only a matter of minutes until Mark Mora or other political friends of the dead Detective Rotha swore out a murder complaint.

Wildcat assembled the known facts quickly. He was convinced now that there was a crime syndicate operating behind the jewel thieves—an organization powerful enough to play with a man like Rotha, the shyster lawyers and the insurance companies.

Twice the crime syndicate had killed its own tools by deadly hydrocyanic gas. First, Chuck Willoughby, for what reason Wildcat did not know, unless the thief had talked too much.

Now Detective Rotha and that, too, was probably

because the members of the syndicate believed Wildcat Gordon had compelled Rotha to talk too much. Wildcat recalled that Mark Mora, the lawyer, must have been in the outer office, after all, when Rotha had begun whining.

Wildcat realized grimly that his own words in his office, the conversation with the insurance company, his statements to Mark Mora—all put a club in the hands of the syndicate in the form of a murder charge.

The syndicate did not know as yet that the hydrocyanic gas had been detected in the case of Chuck Willoughby, and again in the death of Rotha.

The whole case was becoming linked up in Wildcat's mind. He knew that Paul Brandt, when released, had gone several times to a certain respectable business building in an effort to see someone, but had failed.

Then it was apparent that Paul Brandt and his sweetheart, Eve Willoughby, must be informed of those who had been backing Chuck Willoughby. The time had come for the youth and the girl to talk, and to talk fast.

Eve Willoughby's address had not been discovered by Deputy Bolton's investigators. Wildcat had had Detective Mahoney, one of his ace detectives, sent to guard the girl's tenement rooms.

He decided now it would be a good plan to move Eve Willoughby to some safe place, so he headed his coupé toward the slum district of Argos Street.

IN the meantime, darkness had fallen in Argos Street. This was about the time newspaper extras were hitting the streets, headlined with a new sensation.

Police Commissioner Gordon had been formally charged with murder in the Detective Rotha case.

There was some prompt action at headquarters. Deputy Bolton got into the saddle and attempted to extract from Sergeant Thorsen any information he might have had. As a result, Sergeant Thorsen called Detective Mahoney off the Eve Willoughby place temporarily, fearing Bolton's men might chance upon him there.

Thus it happened that the pretty, sad-eyed Eve Willoughby was crouching by her window in the darkness of her front room. She had obeyed Wildcat's strange command not to leave the place. She had been weeping, desperate over her fear for what might have happened to Paul Brandt.

The girl had not been aware that Detective Mahoney had watched her rooms until a short time before, then had departed. Eve Willoughby watched the narrow street below for any sign of activity that might affect her.

"If I only knew what had become of Paul," she whispered.

Knowing that her sweetheart had been attacked

near her place, she was aware that her own address must be known to those who had been responsible for the machine gunning. The girl kept an automatic pistol in her hand, eyes upon the stoop below.

Eve Willoughby had no means of knowing the dainty, doll-like girl in the blue coat who crossed the street and ascended the street steps was Tiny Traeger, the little friend of Wildcat Gordon.

The usual dancing devils had left the dark-blue eyes of Tiny. They had been replaced by two sparks of fury. Wildcat Gordon had been accused of murder, hadn't he? And he had been protecting this girl known as Eve Willoughby. For Tiny had listened to a conversation Wildcat had had with old Quick Trigger. Thus she had obtained Eve Willoughby's address.

Tough as he might be, Tiny was convinced Wildcat had a soft streak when it came to dealing with women. From what she had heard, this Eve Willoughby must know plenty about the jewel robberies.

Quick Trigger had been absent, on some mysterious assignment from Wildcat. Tiny had not known where Wildcat might be when the news of the murder charge broke. So the girl's dark-blue eyes smoldered, and she decided to have some conversation with this Eve Willoughby.

Tiny sniffed scornfully as she crossed Argos Street from a taxicab and observed the unsavory neighborhood and the squalid tenement building that bore the other girl's address. She had a fairly clear idea that no woman could reside in such a neighborhood and be anything but crooked.

Tiny went up dimly lighted stairs toward the third-floor rooms of Eve Willoughby, her slender fingers clasped around the butt of an automatic pistol held under her coat.

Her grandfather had been a policeman too many years for her not to be fully aware of the only practical method of dealing with crooks, men or women.

First, you made sure you had the drop on them.

So Tiny tightened her grip on the pistol, found the glassless door of Eve Willoughby's room and rapped smartly.

HAVING seen the strange girl enter the building, Eve Willoughby was sure it was she at the door. Unfortunately for both girls, Eve was frightened, and she had the immediate thought that this might be some kind of a trick on the part of those seeking Paul Brandt. They must have known she would be on guard and watching.

An attempt to deceive her into opening the door was being made by sending along this one girl. Eve permitted the interior of the room to remain in darkness. Before she left the window to reply to the knock, she pulled down the shade.

Tiny heard a key turn, and the door opened a few inches. The fiery granddaughter of old Quick Trigger had her own ideas of good police work. Her small, compact body hit the door suddenly and jammed it back upon the other girl.

Tiny's pistol flashed from her coat and pointed toward Eve Willoughby, who was only a shadow in the darkness.

"Put 'em up, you!" snapped Tiny's clear treble.

Eve Willoughby had been prepared for just such a move.

"I thought so!" her voice hissed, and an automatic in her hand slapped out and downward, striking Tiny's gun wrist and sending her pistol banging uselessly to the floor.

"Now you get 'em up!" commanded Eve Willoughby.

Tiny cried, "You think so?" She darted forward, diving toward the floor, her arms embracing the other girl's knees and throwing her from her feet. They rolled to the floor together.

Eve Willoughby cried out and started to bring her pistol down on the other girl's skull. Then she gasped and withheld the blow. Light enough had come through the door to reveal the childlike oval of Tiny's face, the clustering black curls and the wide, blue eyes.

Instead of striking, Eve attempted to free herself. But Tiny's anger and belief that she was in the right started her small fists pounding at the other girl's head. It then became a queer battle.

EVE WILLOUGHBY had realized she was much larger and heavier than Tiny. It seemed she should be able to handle her with ease. But Tiny failed to live up to the rules—if any—for a woman in a fight.

Instead of employing her fingernails, she was using her hard little fists with the effectiveness of a boy. She pummeled at Eve Willoughby's face before Eve could trap her wrists.

"You got him into this!" cried Tiny. "Got him into a murder, and you're going to talk, or I'll beat you to a pulp!"

These words did not tend to enlighten the other girl. Her strong hands locked Tiny's wrists securely. Before she subdued the fighting child-woman, Eve was compelled to choke off her cries, then tear strips from her own clothing as she held her.

Eve Willoughby imagined now that Tiny was attempting to scream as a warning to confederates waiting outside. So she concocted a serviceable gag and shut off Tiny's cries as she bound her firmly hand and foot, then wrapped some of her torn clothing around a table leg to hold her.

The room was still in darkness. The hallway door swung partly open. Eve started toward the door, picking up the automatic she had dropped.

She heard someone moving stealthily up the stairs toward the third-floor hallway. There was a furtive murmuring of voices. "You're a nice little thing to be hooked up with things like this," said Eve to the speechless and raging Tiny. "But I can't wait to find out more about it. Your friends probably will turn you loose."

Eve hastily donned a coat over her torn dress, pushed back her tangled hair and slipped through the kitchenette to a side roof. A minute later she was making her way breathlessly down a fire escape into the alley, her automatic held ready for instant use.

THE men Eve had heard coming up the stairs were a pair of hard young mugs with caps drawn over their eyes. They halted at the head of the stairs and flicked a signal to two other men waiting on the second floor close to the stairway.

Then the pair went on toward Eve Willoughby's door. One pushed the door open, flashed a light and said, "Well, get a load o' that, wouldja? Who do you suppose put this doll on the blink?"

"To hell with who done it!" rasped the other fellow. "Get her out of here before something cracks! You know our orders! This Willoughby girl is poison to the chief!"

The mugs were helped in their job by Tiny Traeger already being wrapped up ready for delivery, along with that convenient gag Eve Willoughby had used. Within a minute, the two men were carrying her toward the backstairs of the tenement, after passing a signal to the two fellows guarding the stairway in front.

Wildcat Gordon knew nothing of what had taken place within the past few minutes, as he walked from his coupé to the front entrance of Eve Willoughby's address.

The commissioner had remained his own jaunty self and had been fortunate in reaching Argos Street without encountering any of his own coppers who were under orders to bring in their chief on a charge of murder.

He noted from the street that Eve Willoughby's room was in darkness and approved the girl's smartness. However, the hallway light on the second floor was out and the approach to the stairway leading upward was a black pool.

Wildcat Gordon walked into this, keeping an eye out for Detective Mahoney, believing the dick still to be guarding the girl's place. He set a foot on the lower step of the third-floor stairway, and then the steps above seemed to jump out and crash into his chin.

The blow, however, had come from behind. It was delivered with vicious force, the flat side of a heavy automatic smashing down on Wildcat's army

hat. The hat saved him from having a split skull, but Wildcat rolled to the floor and was quickly pushed to one side under the rickety stairs.

"Damned if it ain't the police commissioner himself!" grated one of the men. "They've got the girl, and we'd better lam outta here! Guess the chief knew his stuff when he said we had to get this Willoughby dame where she couldn't spill the works to Wildcat Gordon!"

The two men went clumping down the stairway.

IT may have been ten minutes or half an hour before Wildcat sat up slowly and rubbed the fog out of his eyes. Several persons had passed the stairway without seeing him there. He shook himself, rose to his feet and moved cautiously.

The door of Eve Willoughby's room was standing open when he entered. He backed to a wall and played a flashlight across the floor. He first saw the torn strip of a dress which apparently had been used to bind someone to a table leg.

As he went toward this, Wildcat's foot struck a hard object. An oath boiled from him as he picked up an automatic pistol with the name "Tiny" inlaid in its handle. Near it on the floor lay a beaded purse.

Wildcat Gordon stood in the middle of the room, swearing under his breath. He had no means of knowing what had happened, but the evidence was plain enough that Tiny Traeger had paid a visit to Eve Willoughby. What had happened?

Wildcat saw the open kitchenette window and found a scrap of dress on the casing. He quickly pieced together what might have happened, but this was not consoling.

He was convinced one or the other of the girls was in the hands of the suspected crime syndicate.

CHAPTER X
A THIEF NABS A THIEF

WILDCAT GORDON judged it was useless to call Quick Trigger's penthouse, but he used a telephone. He was surprised to get a quick reply. But it was not the voice of Tiny or Quick Trigger.

The voice was none other than that of Deputy Henry Bolton. True, the long-nosed deputy made an attempt to disguise his tone, but it was not good enough for Wildcat Gordon. Wildcat carefully replaced his own receiver without speaking.

So the alert Deputy Bolton had himself put a lookout on the Quick Trigger penthouse. No doubt he believed Wildcat might be dumb enough to come walking in. And Wildcat knew that Quick Trigger as well as Tiny had not been there.

The whereabouts of Tiny was still uncertain, but Wildcat knew exactly where Quick Trigger could

be found at this moment. Also, he realized the time had arrived for direct action striking at the mystery of the crime syndicate that seemed to have housed its organization in one of the city's most conservative business buildings.

At this time, a janitor with stooping shoulders, a handlebar mustache and apparently nearsighted eyes was mopping vigorously at the floor in the midtown building. It was getting close to midnight. This janitor had almost finished his cleaning of the ninth-floor corridor, but he deliberately lingered.

It might have been observed that one spot in this corridor was getting an extra polishing. The mop moved again and again over the corridor in the vicinity of one glass door. This door bore the modest legend, "Lakeside Development Co."

The bent janitor occasionally glanced at his watch and kept on mopping. Several times, he let out a muttered grumble.

"Danged if I ever thought I'd come down to this!" was the note of his complaint.

The janitor heard the hissing of the single night elevator. It was stopping at the eighth floor, one stairway down. The janitor bent his head and moved his mop aimlessly.

The footsteps behind him were soundless. A figure, clothed all in quiet gray, came along the corridor and halted beside the janitor.

"How's the layout, Quick Trigger?" said a low, husky voice. "We've got to put our schedule ahead and see what this place shakes out."

THE janitor was old Quick Trigger. He did not cease his mopping. He had been employed here for two days, through a special arrangement of the police department with the building owners.

"There's one watchman inside the offices, and he looks tough, Wildcat," murmured Quick Trigger. "I don't like this layout, and damn it, I've got to work all night! So you have to go and get yourself charged with murder? I hope Tiny ain't found out."

The Whisperer kept to himself his information and his fear for Tiny. The situation was too delicate to get Quick Trigger stirred up. These offices, The Lakeside Development Co., were the same that had been visited by Paul Brandt when he had been shadowed; but the youth had found no one there.

It seemed incredible that this apparently conservative real estate company could be involved in the crime syndicate affairs and the jewel robberies, and Quick Trigger said the men he had seen coming and going were all respectable businessmen.

"That's the trouble, Quick Trigger, with this kind of a racket," said The Whisperer. "There are too many respectable businessmen playing in with the crooks. You found out they had a big safe inside?"

"You have to go through three doors," said

Quick Trigger. "And look out for that mug who's watchin'. He ain't any regular."

Quick Trigger used a pass-key on the front door of the offices. The Whisperer's gray figure was close to one of his shoulders. A glowering man with a big chin stuck his face through the first door.

"What the hell do you want?" he grunted at Quick Trigger. "Ain't yuh swabbed up this place once tonight?"

"Forgot my chamois skin," mumbled Quick Trigger. "Left it on the desk in that office you're in."

The watchman with the big square chin turned his head and said, "You're nuts, old man! I don't see no shammy skin in here!"

He pulled his head back around, and the big chin was presented squarely. The Whisperer's left hand swept Quick Trigger to one side, the right fist shooting out, in a long, straight-arm punch. Knuckles crunched on the big chin and the watchman went down.

The Whisperer said eerily; "Now keep quiet if you want to live!"

The big-chinned watchman might not have heeded this weird command had not The Whisperer's hard knees landed together just below his short ribs and knocked the breath from his lungs. The watchman had lots of what it takes and got one big fist swinging, so The Whisperer let him have it again on the chin.

This time the floor kept the man from rolling his head, and he closed his eyes peacefully.

The Whisperer glided through three doors. The two inner ones were of solid metal, he noted, without glass. If they had been locked, their opening would have presented a problem.

The big safe stood in a corner and it was as respectable as the occupants of the offices. For it was an old-fashioned box, the kind that had long been the delight and easy picking of any wandering safe-cracking criminal.

The Whisperer worked fast, pulling up a rug and muffling the door of the old safe when he had finished a bit of drilling and soaped some high explosive beside the combination knob.

The thudding blast of the explosion was somewhat muffled by the rug. The safe door sagged on its hinges. The Whisperer quickly removed three small iron boxes—boxes which yielded to a key from his pocket.

A hiss of amazement came from The Whisperer. He had not been sure what he might find, but this was considerably more than he had expected.

There were scores of rare unset gems of nearly every variety. Examination failed to disclose whether any of these might be loot of the recent

Lakeside robberies, and then The Whisperer discovered why their identification might be difficult.

Nearly all of the gems—representing several millions—had recently been recut and polished. Great diamonds and other flawless stones had lost their original identities. No doubt this cutting had trimmed thousands of dollars off their value, but at the same time it had made them virtually safe on the open market, if floated by the proper persons.

Who would be the proper persons? Apparently respectable businessmen conducting a development company would be one answer. Or other higher-ups, men who had the inside on the market for such stolen stuff. Then there was the easy settlement, by the route of insurance companies which would rather pay healthy rewards than make good tremendous amounts to the owners of the jewelry.

The Charles De Gron jewels had been returned, but The Whisperer was convinced that these which had been recut never would go back to their rightful owners. The Whisperer gave an eerie chuckle and started packing the gems into his own clothing.

DURING the half hour or more The Whisperer had been at work inside the Lakeside Development Co.'s offices, old Quick Trigger had resumed his harmless mopping in front of the door. Quick Trigger was keeping a watch, and he was greatly worried.

Wildcat had not told him the catch in the Rotha murder charge, that when it became necessary the dead man's lungs would reveal that hydrocyanic gas had been the cause of death. For the present, it was good policy to let the crime syndicate believe its secret was safe, and that a murder charge against Wildcat Gordon had temporarily put that hard-boiled police commissioner out of the picture.

If old Quick Trigger had not thus been engaged with anxious thinking, he might have heard the soft footfalls behind him. A figure was gliding along one wall of the corridor, having ascended the stairway instead of the night elevator.

Quick Trigger knew it was not the point of a finger pushed suddenly into his back. A voice came through clenched teeth.

"Get 'em up, old man, an' do as I say!" Don't turn your head!"

Quick Trigger gave one desperate glance at the door of the offices in which The Whisperer was working and put up his hands. If he could only stall the newcomer long enough to be able to convey some warning to The Whisperer.

The old man had no such opportunity. The door of a cleaning closet opened behind him.

"Walk in there and don't turn around, or I'll fill you full of lead!" came the husky voice. "Behave yourself, old man, and you'll be all right!"

The closet door was slapped shut and the outside key turned. It was a one-way lock and only strenuous kicking would ever loosen it from the inside. Old Quick Trigger muttered imprecations on his own carelessness.

"Guess we ain't doin' so good, Wildcat," he murmured.

Inside the last office but one, The Whisperer had pocketed many rare jewels. Many others lay like a flaming pool on a polished desk, with The Whisperer's flashlight bringing out their beauty.

The Whisperer heard the outer doors open and someone coming in. His voice said huskily, "Quick Trigger, this is one of the biggest knock-offs we—"

"You'll put up your hands and not move!" came a clear voice, with that deadly implication that comes only of a cool brain and a steady trigger finger. "Just step back from that desk, and empty out what you've put into your pockets!"

THE WHISPERER saw a bulky figure with a slouch hat over the eyes and a white handkerchief mask under the hat's brim. An automatic pistol pointed in an undeviating line, and the newcomer moved cautiously forward, making sure The Whisperer had no companions.

"I didn't expect it to be so easy," said the intruder. "Keep one hand up high and use the other to empty your pockets. If you pull a gun, I'll get you first. Especially those papers you took from that safe, I want."

The only light was that from The Whisperer's flashlight lying beside the jewels on the desk. This cast a spreading ray, which unfortunately outlined The Whisperer's queer face and left the holdup party more in darkness.

The intruder studied The Whisperer's long, pointed chin and the extended upper lip. The Whisperer said, "It takes a thief to catch a thief."

He spoke in the weird, unearthly whisper that marked his identity. It seemed to him that the pointed pistol wavered a little, and a quick-drawn breath proved his eerie whisper had registered.

"You're not—You're The Whisperer! You were the peddler with the pushcart!"

These amazing words and the emotion that had forced them out was the crucial instant for which The Whisperer had been waiting. One foot had been coming up slowly. It kicked the flashlight from the desk and plunged the room into darkness as The Whisperer threw himself to the floor and rolled over.

Two spiteful shots cracked from the automatic and slugs bit into the top of the desk among the jewels before The Whisperer's hard arms snapped out and encircled the legs of the other figure. The Whisperer received more of a shock than the sudden arrival of the armed intruder had brought.

For these were not the spindly, hard-boned legs of a man he was clasping. The legs were soft and curving, and the scream that came was distinctly that of a woman.

Nevertheless, The Whisperer was forced to use a persuasive fist that struck under the handkerchief mask before the pistol stopped slapping toward his face.

He locked the girl's wrists firmly and extracted the pistol. Then he rolled his prisoner over, snapped on a pair of regulation handcuffs from behind and jerked his captive erect. In a second, he had his flashlight on the white, beautiful face.

"I thought so!" he hissed. "You're that Willoughby dame the police have been hunting!"

The girl's eyes were luminous, desperate in the blinding ray of the flashlight. The Whisperer had a quick thought.

"You come here as a thief after you killed a girl in your room," he said, ruthlessly.

"No! No! I didn't! I don't know where you get into this, but she was such a little thing! I—I just tied her up. I heard them coming and—"

"You'll tell the rest of it some other time!" commanded the weird whisper. "Why did you come here? What papers were you seeking?"

"You're one of them!" the girl suddenly screamed. "You took Paul Brandt's body away after he was shot down! I'll never—"

The Whisperer closed one hard hand over her mouth. He could hear a hammering at some door outside the office. With the girl's hands handcuffed behind her and a gag twisted between her curving lips, he pushed her to the outside hallway. The burly watchman with the big chin was still unconscious.

THE WHISPERER was in a position where he had to be ruthless. He put the girl out as gently as possible, which was none too gently; then he silenced old Quick Trigger's attempt to explain how he had been trapped.

"You've got your chance now to get in there while that watchman's out and find out more about the inside offices," directed The Whisperer. "I believe you will find another strange room or two. I must get this Eve Willoughby out of here before all hell breaks loose. I guess it may have been a mistake to turn the girl loose."

Quick Trigger shuffled into the offices of the Lakeside Development Co. He passed the knocked-out watchman and presently entered a room containing a long table, like a place where directors might meet. There was a little door at one side of this room.

Quick Trigger investigated this and the room beyond before he slipped out past the unconscious watchman and locked the outside door.

While this was taking place, The Whisperer had Eve Willoughby locked securely to the steering wheel of his coupé. A gag still kept her lips shut, tape having been used.

The coupé shot through a narrow street and entered the mouth of an alley. The Whisperer was headed for the unsavory hideout where he had left Paul Brandt guarded by Brian Boru.

But as the little car entered the alley, two figures moved from one point to another. The Whisperer caught the glinting of a light on a copper shield. He saw a bulky object in the middle of the alley.

The police had found the peddler's pushcart in which Paul Brandt had been brought to the hide-out. The Whisperer slid his coupé close to an alley wall and turned out the lights.

CHAPTER XI
HIS OWN POLICE TRAP

HARDLY had the coupé been braked to a stop and the lights put out, when The Whisperer heard the well-known and unpleasant voice of Deputy Henry Bolton.

"I tell you, fellows, Wildcat Gordon knows something about this damn peddler and his cart, so you'll keep the whole block staked out until this peddler shows up! I'm going to lay for Wildcat Gordon myself! Him and his rough stuff are all finished!"

The Whisperer thus became aware that he had slid his coupé right into a police trap. Somehow he had gotten through, but it was hardly likely he could make his way out. As The Whisperer, he was also the gray peddler they were seeking. It would be embarrassing to be taken by his own police in that guise.

He considered for a moment. He could make a quick change to his own personality of Wildcat Gordon. His mouth twisted. Yes, and run right into an arrest for murder. Wouldn't that tickle the fancy of the persistent Henry Bolton, and of Mayor Van Royston!

No. He had other work to do. He said to the speechless, trapped girl beside him.

"Stay quiet and you won't be hurt. Try to work that tape loose and you'll bring the cops down on you. You'll be better sticking with me, after you understand."

Eve Willoughby squirmed, and her eyes were filled with fear. She was still handcuffed to the wheel of the car. The Whisperer slid into the alley and left her there. The coupé was in an angle of a wall and a billboard. There was a chance it would not be discovered. None but a man who knew the weak spots in his own police lines could have gotten out of that alley undetected. But at the street front, The Whisperer saw that squad cars and plain-clothes men blocked all corners and avenues of possible escape. A ghostly chuckle told of The Whisperer's sudden humor.

Though Deputy Henry Bolton appeared to be in charge of this new stakeout for the gray-clad peddler of the pushcart, The Whisperer knew well enough his deputy would much prefer to pinch Wildcat Gordon. Well, friend Henry was about to have his chance.

THE WHISPERER slid into a small drugstore and entered a phone booth. His dental plates came out and the normal voice of Wildcat Gordon went over the phone.

"I believe you ought to get the credit for the murder pinch, Sergeant Thorsen," said Wildcat. "Now you'll call Deputy Bolton and give him some

information. Later, I have some other plans for you."

"O.K., chief!" stated the unemotional Sergeant Thorsen. "The big and little politicians are swarming all over the place. You wouldn't imagine a rat like that Detective Rotha had so many friends."

"Perhaps he hadn't so many friends as I have enemies," chuckled Wildcat. "Now you've got the lay. Be ready in about twenty minutes. I think there's going to be a fire in this neighborhood. That's always bad."

Wildcat Gordon had changed back to his jaunty, normal self, but he was still in the drugstore telephone booth when Sergeant Thorsen got Deputy Bolton on a patrol call-box.

"I've just had word that Wildcat Gordon himself is down in that district looking for that gray peddler," stated Sergeant Thorsen. "I have always been strong for Wildcat, but I can't stomach murder."

Deputy Bolton was dumb enough to fall for that line. He should have known the wooden-faced Sergeant Thorsen better. But a chance to nab Wildcat Gordon was one in a lifetime.

Deputy Bolton issued rapid orders to the stakeout men just about the time Wildcat Gordon in all of his sartorial glory sauntered from the door of a neighborhood drugstore.

These coppers were at the end of the block. One blew a shrill blast on his whistle, then started running.

Wildcat had marked the doors of half a dozen bars and brothels on the opposite side of the street. He scuttled for one of these, in apparent panicky haste. As he got into a barroom door, he saw the lanky form of Deputy Bolton loom up at the other end of the block.

More whistles shrilled, and Wildcat chuckled grimly. For at least a few minutes the stakeout to get the missing gray peddler was broken up. The policemen had made the mistake of rushing toward the sound of the whistles.

A blinking bartender saw the figure of Wildcat, with the army hat cocked over one eye. He knew it to be the police commissioner, and that the newspapers had said he was wanted for murder. The bartender ran to the front door and shouted to the racing coppers. There was less than a minute to spare, but in that minute Wildcat reached the alley, sprang up and caught a swinging fire escape ladder and went into the open window of a tenement flat.

A woman and two children squawked loudly, but Wildcat emerged into a hallway. Within the next minute an inconspicuous figure in gray, with whitish hair, came slowly and calmly from the front stoop of the tenement house.

He was The Whisperer. With the chase concentrated on Wildcat Gordon, The Whisperer passed

close to half a dozen of his own coppers before one keen-eyed rookie spotted him as the gray peddler the stakeout had been set to trap. This rookie shouted.

Then the rookie made the mistake of being far ahead of others as The Whisperer went around a corner. The young copper was determined to discover where the man in gray might disappear. Unluckily for the rookie, The Whisperer had halted, waiting.

A fist caught the young copper before he could use the gun in his hand. When other policemen reached the corner, the rookie was sitting on the sidewalk, dazedly rubbing his chin.

"Never mind that damn peddler now!" Deputy Bolton was yelling. "Keep after Wildcat Gordon! Don't let him get away!"

The hunt was worse than divided. The stakeout men ran this way and that, pouring into doorways and searching tenements. A woman reported Wildcat Gordon had run through her flat.

AS the chase after Wildcat proceeded, The Whisperer glided into the barren room of his present hideout. Paul Brandt was sitting in the chair, with Brian Boru crouched at his feet.

"You've got to let me get out of here!" exploded the youth. "I've got things to do, and you can't hold me!"

The Whisperer had no time for gentle methods. He knocked Paul Brandt out, silencing him, then permitted the limp body to slip to the floor. Then he shoved two vessels that looked like black kettles under the windows. A lighted match touched the contents of these pots and there was a muffled explosion.

Black smoke and flame poured from the broken windows. These windows were high above the narrow tenement street. Cries of "Fire!" floated up. The Whisperer gave a ghostly chuckle, ordered Brian Boru to follow and started down the backstairs, carrying Paul Brandt over one shoulder. Smoke poured in a thick cloud from the top of the tenement building. Below it, the narrow street instantly became congested as frightened habitues of the nearby buildings thronged into the street. A fire alarm was turned in; police sirens started their screaming. The Whisperer waited until he saw coppers who had been stationed in the alley running to help control the confusion in the street. He carried Paul Brandt's unconscious figure swiftly to his hidden coupé, thinking grimly of what Eve Willoughby would say when she saw her sweetheart.

But Eve Willoughby had nothing to say. As The Whisperer opened the door of the little car, he saw one handcuff and the broken links of its chain

attached to the steering post. The girl had disappeared.

The Whisperer was sure the girl was not strong enough to have snapped that chain. He could see that a pointed tool had been used to pry the chain links apart. The Whisperer was equally convinced that the police had not discovered Eve Willoughby, or he would have heard of it from the mouthy Henry Bolton.

This left only the conclusion that henchmen of the crime syndicate must have gotten quickly on his trail and that they had taken the girl away. How this could have been accomplished with the police stakeout, The Whisperer was at a loss for a minute to guess.

Then he recalled the apparent respectable character of a number of men who might be connected with that Lakeside Development Co. Such citizens as might have passed the police lines without difficulty.

The Whisperer started the little car slowly from the alley, as the fire equipment screamed into the street. The men would find only a pair of smoke pots burning in the room that had been The Whisperer's hideout.

Brian Boru was closed in the rumble seat of the coupé. Paul Brandt was pushed down to the floor and the little car neared the first cross street. The Whisperer braked down and again ran the coupé into a dark corner.

Apparently Deputy Henry Bolton had summoned more reserves. The block in which the tenement was supposedly burning was now tightly enclosed by the police lines. It was impossible to run the coupé through these lines without being questioned. It was equally impossible to break through carrying the unconscious Paul Brandt.

Once more came The Whisperer's ghostly chuckle. He saw the lighted rear door of a barroom. The habitants of this place had rushed out to see the fire.

The Whisperer moved his hands swiftly, produced a fresh carnation from a pocket of the little car and climbed into the alley.

It was Wildcat Gordon, with his hat cocked over one eye, who walked into the rear door of the barroom and got into a telephone booth. His words were few and to the point.

"O.K., Sergeant Thorsen! I'll be starting through the police lines when you drive up! You can make it in six minutes!"

IT was six minutes almost to the second when Sergeant Thorsen and three detectives arrived in a squad car at the mouth of the alley where the coupé still held the unconscious Paul Brandt.

One minute before the squad car arrived, Wildcat Gordon applied a stimulant to Paul Brandt

and the young man opened his eyes to blink at the police commissioner.

"You got him, that whispering guy?" said Paul Brandt. "I think you had better lock me up, Commissioner Gordon. That whispering fellow is out to steal all of the De Gron collection of rocks. I'm sure glad you come along!"

"I got the whispering guy," said Wildcat Gordon. "You had a hard rap over the head. If you can walk, there's a car waiting."

A patrolman who had been on the stakeout and was now on the fire line, let out a yell. A squad car commanded by Sergeant Thorsen had shot up to the mouth of an alley. The patrolman saw Wildcat Gordon in person and another young fellow surrounded by detectives pouring out of the Thorsen car.

"You're under arrest, Commissioner Gordon!" snapped Sergeant Thorsen, loud enough for all around to hear. "You and this other mug get into that car!"

The gaping patrolman saw two detectives seize Wildcat and Paul Brandt. A pair of handcuffs suddenly locked the pair together. The patrolman started running, seeking Deputy Henry Bolton to tell him the news.

Wildcat and Paul Brandt were shoved into the rear seat of Sergeant Thorsen's squad car. The police siren loudly commanded an opening through the fire lines and the stakeout which had been established by Deputy Bolton.

Bolton's most friendly coppers stood with hands hanging as they saw their commissioner a prisoner with the wooden-faced Sergeant Thorsen sitting beside the driver of the squad car.

When they had passed the last of the stakeout and swung into a quieter street, Wildcat said, "Good work, Sergeant Thorsen. This will probably cost you your job."

Sergeant Thorsen grinned a little and said, "With you in the hoosegow, chief, none of us would have a job anyway. What's the order now?"

Wildcat grinned, and Paul Brandt stared. The youth believed he had just been rescued from The Whisperer by the police commissioner. Now apparently the commissioner himself was under arrest. The youth knew nothing of the Detective Rotha murder charge.

The squad car had been hitting it up, but now it slowed. Paul Brandt suddenly showed he had some stuff in him. Wildcat Gordon had been his friend in all this trouble.

Without warning, the youth jerked up one fist and smacked the detective sitting next to him.

"It ain't right!" he shouted. "You ain't cops, or you wouldn't be pinchin' the commissioner!"

No doubt, Paul Brandt was greatly bewildered. Sergeant Thorsen looked back with a stolid grin, as

one of his men took the blow on one of his ears and howled. Sergeant Thorsen then uttered a peculiar command.

"All right, boys, go to it!"

PAUL BRANDT was amazed when the detective he had hit failed to strike back. This dick used a fist, but it smashed into the jaw of a fellow detective. Another dick deliberately reached out and cracked his knuckles across Sergeant Thorsen's skull.

No doubt, Paul Brandt would have fought some more, but there was such a sudden mix-up, with detectives' fists flailing at each other, that the youth could only sit rigid and gasp. Wildcat Gordon used his free hand to jam the cap of the car driver down over his eyes.

As the squad car slowed over the curbing and crumpled a fender on an iron railing above a basement stairway, a door flew open and two battling detectives rolled to the sidewalk.

Sergeant Thorsen had just ripped the collar from one of his men when Wildcat said: "Come on, Brandt! It's some kind of a frame-up!"

The dazed Paul Brandt ran with Wildcat around the nearest corner.

There was a coupé parked there. Sergeant Thorsen had seen to that. Before he got the little car moving, Wildcat calmly produced a key to the handcuffs and released Paul Brandt.

"I'm in something of a jam on account of your mix-up, Brandt," said Wildcat. "In fact, I'm charged with the murder of Detective Rotha, and unless you spill all you know in connection with the jewel thefts, it looks like I'm on the spot."

Paul Brandt's face went chalky.

"You've been my friend," he said, chokingly. "It's only fair to tell you about the school, as they call it. The school for murder that got Chuck Willoughby, me and some of the other boys."

"So, it's a school for murder?" said Wildcat. "I imagined it would be something like that."

CHAPTER XII
THE CRIME SYNDICATE

"YOU have to pull something big before they let you know any of the men running the school," said Paul Brandt. "I guess Chuck Willoughby done more than he was supposed to do. If one of the boys is ordered to bump off somebody, that's what he has to do. But if it's only a burglar job, he ain't even supposed to carry a rod."

Wildcat Gordon was driving the coupé rapidly away from the vicinity of his hideout and the fake tenement fire. He had released the Scottish terrier, Brian Boru, and ordered him to go to another place. The black dog obeyed implicitly.

"You know then, Brandt," said Wildcat, "that this school or crime syndicate has been operating from offices called the Lakeside Development Co. Now who of these men do you know? How many are in the syndicate?"

"I guess the jig's up with me, Commissioner Gordon, so I might as well tell all I know. Chuck Willoughby pointed out only two men to me. They are partners in another real estate office in that same building. They are Howard Rathbone and William Simms."

Wildcat clucked in his throat. Rathbone and Simms were among the supposed respectable civic leaders of one of Mayor Van Royston's pet reform districts.

"There's three or four others," stated Paul Brandt. "But only a few of the boys—the ones they've got plenty on—have ever been permitted to get into their place. I went there, but couldn't get in. First, I wanted to find out what had happened to Eve Willoughby's brother, and then I heard he'd been bumped off."

Wildcat was adding up several angles. Chuck Willoughby had been sent to steal the Charles De Gron jewels. There he had killed two persons, Mrs. De Gron and a guard. Then Chuck Willoughby had been removed. It had been made to appear as if he had been shot.

"Where's the gas chamber of death, Brandt?" Wildcat shot out suddenly.

He knew that Paul Brandt hesitated, faltered.

"The hydrocyanic stuff?" the youth said, in a trembling voice. "I'd heard about that, but I didn't quite believe it. Only the boys that have put over a bump-off are allowed to know about that. If there is such a place, I don't know where it is."

Wildcat knew Paul Brandt was speaking the truth, for in the next minute he was pleading with Wildcat to help find Eve Willoughby.

"Eve's straight as a string," he said. "She loves me and she tried to keep me from mixing up with her brother, Chuck. But he said all I had to do was drive a car on a little trip and he would see I got a stake to get married."

"We'll find Eve Willoughby for you, Brandt," promised Wildcat, thinking grimly of the gas chamber of death and of the missing Tiny Traeger.

THE coupé arrived in another congested tenement street across town. Five minutes later, Wildcat had conducted Paul Brandt to another of his underworld hideouts. Old Quick Trigger was there, pacing the floor nervously.

"I thought they'd gotten you, Wildcat," said the older man. "I am due to get on my janitor's job, and, Wildcat, I can't find Tiny!"

The former deputy commissioner was trembling.

Not often did his hands shake or his voice betray what he felt.

"Yes, I know about Tiny," admitted Wildcat. "You might as well know, Quick Trigger. The crime syndicate has got her, and your job as janitor puts you in the best position to get a line on where she may have been taken. Don't do anything rash, Quick Trigger. There's another move or two in this game before we can clamp down, and then we've got to make it hard and fast to save Tiny and this other girl, Eve Willoughby."

"Don't do anything rash, Wildcat?" shouted Quick Trigger. "You're telling me, and you're being hunted for murder, and Tiny has been abducted by that gang of killers! I'm going up there and take that place—"

Wildcat's hand touched the older man's arm.

"Exactly the way I feel, Quick Trigger, but the wrong move will sign Tiny's death warrant. There's one man at the head of this school for murder that we have to tie up with all this, and his alibi right now is ninety-nine percent perfect."

Wildcat drew Quick Trigger to one side and issued rapid instructions. The older man groaned.

"Two days to wait, Wildcat! We'll never find Tiny alive!"

WHATEVER Wildcat's directions may have been, it was certain he could not again appear as police commissioner until this case had been broken. And in the meantime, Sergeant Thorsen and several detectives had been suspended from the department.

Deputy Henry Bolton was with Mayor Van Royston, Charles De Gron and some other Lakeside citizens in the commissioner's office.

"Sergeant Thorsen reported that Wildcat Gordon was handcuffed, but that he and Paul Brandt took his men by surprise and wrecked the squad car," said Deputy Bolton. "I took the liberty to suspend all of Thorsen's men. I think the whole damn thing was a frame-up. Sergeant Thorsen's always played in with Wildcat Gordon."

"You were right, Henry," stated Mayor Van Royston. "But Mr. De Gron and these other gentlemen are not satisfied. Last night, while your men were looking for Gordon and that peddler you think might be The Whisperer, it was The Whisperer that blew a safe in the office of the Lakeside Development Co. and got away with the biggest haul in jewels that has been made."

Charles De Gron came into the conversation, with an edge on his voice.

"Don't you think, mayor, it's about time your police department got this fellow they call The Whisperer? My friends here had some rare jewels of their clients in that safe. In fact, I had a few of my own unset diamonds that I had trusted to

Howard Rathbone and William Simms. When citizens cannot be protected in a public building, I'd say it was time to shakeup the whole police department."

Deputy Henry Bolton wore a mocking grin. His idea of a real shakeup of the department would be to put him in Commissioner Gordon's shoes. Mayor Van Royston concurred in that idea.

Howard Rathbone and William Simms were strong supporters of Mayor Van Royston. They were among those then in the office. Both were dignified citizens, and they had demanded especially that The Whisperer be apprehended.

"It will not be long until another election, Mayor Van Royston," stated Howard Rathbone. "I'm afraid it will be your incompetent police department that will defeat you."

"I'm sure all of us feel the same way about that," added William Simms, his partner.

Then Mayor Van Royston stated that Wildcat Gordon was out for good, of course, after the Rotha murder and likely would be sent up for it when he was caught. He added—somewhat to Deputy Bolton's disgust — that he would confer with them directly on the selection of a new commissioner.

Charles De Gron drew Mayor Van Royston aside.

"You know the display of famous jewels is scheduled for the state museum tomorrow, Van Royston. I would ask that you have a special police guard placed there. Some of my most valuable gems will be in that display."

Mayor Van Royston eagerly made that promise. In his order to Deputy Bolton he said, "Henry, your work on this protection job and the getting of The Whisperer may be your way into the commissioner's chair. If anything happens to the display, I'm afraid all of us will be through. The city is stirred up."

No doubt the series of jewel thefts, the murder charge against Wildcat Gordon, the reports of the robbery by The Whisperer—all added to the crowds thronging the state museum. The city was indeed stirred up.

THE morning of the display, old Quick Trigger returned to Wildcat's underworld hideout where Paul Brandt was being kept in safety, and reported wearily he had gotten no trace to the whereabouts of Tiny Traeger or Eve Willoughby. But there was excitement in the former deputy's voice.

"Wildcat," he said, "you ain't goin' through with what you was plannin'? Even The Whisperer could never get through the police guard. I passed the state museum on the way here, and even the block outside is spotted with detectives."

Wildcat smiled grimly.

"You will notice by the morning newspapers that

the famous De Gron jewels will be the feature of the museum's display," he said. "I see, also, that it is regretted a few rare gems will not appear. Those must have been in the safe of the Lakeside Development Co. But some of the stuff turned back by Detective Rotha will be in that display."

"I wish I'd never made those fool dental plates," complained old Quick Trigger. "Wildcat, you'll never get away with it. Nobody could!"

CHAPTER XIII
MILLIONS ON DISPLAY

TWO mounted machine guns commanded one whole side of the polished granite display hall of the state museum. These weapons were manned by two of the police department's best men.

Though crowds thronged around the doors of the display hall, only fifty persons were admitted at one time to feast their eyes upon the hundred or more cases of famous jewels.

The stands on which these cases were set had been placed under spotlights, which made the gems resemble lines of reflected fire. Of all the display, the Charles De Gron exhibit attracted the greatest attention. The magnificent rubies of this collection resembled a small pool of shining blood.

Charles De Gron himself passed considerable time near the cases where his rubies, diamonds and emeralds drew continued comment. There was a feeling in the crowd that these jewels really represented the blood which the rubies so gruesomely duplicated.

None passed the jewels without a thought of the murdered Mrs. De Gron, of the other robberies and deaths that had seemed to follow in the wake of the De Gron gems, their theft and restoration.

Deputy Henry Bolton passed a part of the day in the museum display hall, making sure that ten of his men were on the alert. Besides those stationed at various points, two trusted detectives had been especially assigned to the De Gron jewels.

THE day passed without incident, and the crowd thinned as darkness fell outside. One detective standing before the magnificent De Gron jewels said, "We get relief at six, and I'm glad the day's over. It's the first time I ever stood in front of ten millions in jewelry and wished I was some place else."

There were then perhaps only twenty spectators. With the two detectives beside the De Gron jewels, there were eight others from the regular city department. All of the coppers were consulting their watches or glancing at the big clock at the end of the hall. It lacked five minutes to six o'clock.

Deputy Henry Bolton growled under his breath

and walked toward the door of the display rooms. He had issued orders for the relief shift of guards to come on at ten minutes before six o'clock. They were now five minutes late.

Deputy Bolton scarcely noticed the little man in the rather ragged gray clothes, who held a floor brush and a long-handled dustpan. He appeared to be one of the building janitors, sweeping up a few ashes and papers here and there.

With the thinning of the crowd, the attention of the men at the two machine guns slackened. They were hungry, and anxious to be relieved. Sitting in one spot looking at some other person's millions for six hours had been a boresome occupation.

Anyway, the police regarded all of these precautions as useless. Who would think of attempting to break through the safeguards of the big museum and into its display hall?

Suddenly Deputy Bolton swore and said, "Well, they're coming at last! Now all of you folks stand back until the guard has been changed!"

Deputy Bolton liked to show his authority. The twenty or so viewers of the jewels moved over to one wall. The little gray man with the brush and dustpan shuffled forward and started cleaning at the floor where they had been standing.

Deputy Bolton swore again. Only six uniformed policemen came through the display hall door in military formation. He had ordered ten. And he suddenly saw the faces of two men. They were a pair who had been suspended with Sergeant Thorsen.

"Say!" shouted Henry Bolton. "What is this? Hold it, boys! There's something wrong here!"

He spoke too late. The two machine gunners had started climbing over the rail from their mounted guns. These weapons were so placed that the niches where they were could be thrown into sudden darkness.

Pools of deep shadow suddenly enfolded the machine guns. The six policemen who had come in seemed to have halted. One copper turned and swung at another one. The police who had first been on guard were beginning to get out their guns, when the lights all went out.

The darkness was so sudden, it was apparent a fuse had been blown, or a main lead severed. Deputy Bolton howled, "Look out, men! Get to the doors! Block them! Don't let anyone leave!"

The heavy voice of Charles De Gron spoke.

"Maybe it's an accident! Don't anyone move!"

Then came the weird, penetrating whisper that permeated all of the huge, vaulted display hall.

"It's no accident!" stated that eerily commanding voice. "Stay quiet and none will be hurt!"

THE newly arrived coppers had been slugging

each other. Some of the special guards suddenly barged into this mix-up, their fists and gun butts swinging in the darkness.

Someone, perhaps with malice aforethought—possibly it was the suspended Sergeant Thorsen himself—banged Henry Bolton solidly on the head and the deputy went down.

"Then you won't be quiet!" came that weird, penetrating whisper.

One of the mounted machine guns sputtered with terrific staccato explosions into the enclosed space of the hall. None there could know that the weapon was carefully aimed too high to strike anyone. All those in the hall could see was the stream of pale flashes.

A few women screamed. Men swore and dropped on their stomachs. Henry Bolton already was on his stomach and he stayed there. None of his men or the newly arrived coppers made any effort to block the two doors, for the eerie whisper spoke on sudden cessation of the machine gun's blaze.

"Stay away from the doors, or they'll be blasted! In five minutes you will have lights!"

Charles De Gron let out a cry, which abruptly became a groan and a body was heard to thump to the floor. One hard fist of The Whisperer had shot out from the darkness and caught the man's chin. He had been moving toward his own special display of jewels.

Minutes passed and only a faint shuffling movement indicated some persons were attempting to crawl out of the hall unheard. The lights all came on so quickly they were caught in the act, and sheepishly ceased to move.

Then it was that Deputy Henry Bolton leaped to his feet.

"Close off the doors! Stop the new cops who came in! Don't let anyone out!"

His regulars and the special museum guards looked about to seize upon the coppers who had seemed to be behind all of this disturbance. Not one of the six coppers who had come in apparently for the changing shift remained in the big hall.

Blood was flowing from Charles De Gron's cut lips. The scar over his eye was livid with rage. He pointed for several seconds before he could gulp out.

"Look! Mine! They've got the whole collection! Stop 'em! Bolton, I hold you personally responsible for this robbery!"

Those in the hall stared at the cases where the millions in the famous De Gron jewels had reposed. Only a single red ruby, like a spot of blood on black velvet, remained.

Among the babbling, excited persons eager to leave the hall, the janitor in ragged gray clothes stood with his floor brush and dustpan. His color-

less eyes stared stupidly from under a ragged hat, and his hands trembled on his cleaning tools.

"Take everybody, one by one, and search them!" ordered Deputy Bolton. "My men will frisk the special guards! This might be anybody, and they couldn't get out of here!"

Henry Bolton ignored the fact that six uniformed policemen had come and gone. His detectives started searching those in the crowd. The ragged

janitor in gray carefully deposited his dustpan and brush beside the wall and stood in the line to be searched.

A copper ran hands over his ragged gray clothes, while the man mumbled and whispered to himself.

"O.K! Get out!" said the copper. Charles De Gron was waving his arms in front of Deputy Bolton.

"I hear Mayor Van Royston was planning on making you commissioner! And you let my jewels

be snatched right under the nose of your police! I want them back, and damned if I care how you get them, or you'll be as broken in the department as Wildcat Gordon!"

The policemen on guard at the door were still holding everyone, but when the ragged janitor shuffled along with his brush and dustpan, still sweeping at the floor, they did not notice him vanish into a side door.

IT was perhaps two minutes later that two respectable-appearing businessmen came hurriedly into the display hall. They were the real estate men and civic leaders, Howard Rathbone and William Simms. They came up to De Gron.

"Just heard the bad news outside, Charley," said Rathbone. "How in the world could it happen? Next thing, someone will be walking off with the city hall."

Deputy Bolton was still performing for the benefit of the crowd, but his heart was not in it. He did get on a telephone and order Sergeant Thorsen and the other suspended coppers picked up. When he came back, Rathbone and Simms were still talking with the excited Charles De Gron.

A little man in ragged gray clothes was passing out of the museum at about this time. He went around the building and halted abruptly as he saw Howard Rathbone and William Simms climb from their car.

"Couldn't be better than that," murmured The Whisperer, in a husky voice. "Now if there's only McCarthy up at that first traffic corner, it might work out."

The ragged gray man moved swiftly to the car Rathbone and Simms had left. Rare jewels, that had recently come from the hollow space in a janitor's dustpan, were produced from his ragged clothing.

"All or none," he murmured. "Now to see if McCarthy has it in him to stick."

In three minutes, and between the car and the corner, The Whisperer had stepped into a phone booth of the elevated railway. It was Wildcat Gordon in all his glory who came out hurriedly.

Though the whole city was looking for him, he shoved through the crowd to a traffic corner. A red-faced, middle-aged Irishman commanded the intersection. When he saw Wildcat Gordon, his eyes jumped, but they did not become hard.

The traffic officer strode over and put a hand on one of Wildcat's arms.

"Git into the clear wid ye!" he ordered. "Ye wouldn't be wantin' Tim McCarthy to have the disgracefulness of havin' had to pinch yuh, chief!"

"Thought you'd be right, McCarthy!" snapped Wildcat. "Now listen! You've only seconds to spare! You see that blue car in front of the museum? You just saw two men bring something out of the museum, put something under the seat cushions and go back in. Those men will be coming out. They are named Rathbone and Simms, and they are both wearing dark suits with a light pin stripe, and Derby hats!"

McCarthy mopped his perspiring forehead.

"What's the lay, chief?"

"It'll begin putting the finger on who really murdered Detective Rotha—"

"That's all I wanted to know!" snapped Tim McCarthy. "Sure, an' I saw them lads with the Derby hats puttin' somethin' under the seat cushions, even if I lost me job for it, chief!"

WILDCAT GORDON merged with the crowd as Officer McCarthy hurried toward the blue car near the museum. He saw Rathbone and Simms coming down the steps accompanied by Charles

De Gron and Deputy Henry Bolton, and then he heard Tim McCarthy's bull-like voice.

"Just a minute, gintlemen! I'm after seein' what you was hidin' so carefully under thim seat cushions!"

Wildcat Gordon wore a broad grin as he faded into the nearest subway stairs.

At that moment, Deputy Bolton was bellowing, "What's got into your thick skull, McCarthy? An' why ain't you at your post of duty?"

"Sure, chief, an' I was after seein' these two lads here makin' suspicious motions, an' I come to see about it, sir!"

"What in hell are you talkin' about?" asked Charles De Gron.

"Yes, are you looking at us?" said Howard Rathbone.

"It's you an' that other Derby I'm after lookin' at!" said Tim McCarthy. "Wasn't it you lads just got out of this bus an' went in, after you'd put somethin' under the cushions? Maybe it's you're hidin' your bottle, an' if so, it's all right!"

"You're crazy, McCarthy!" roared Henry Bolton. "You'll get ten days off for this! Now get back—"

But Tim McCarthy's broad hand had lifted the rear seat cushions. Lights was reflected from glowing rubies and flashing diamonds. Tim McCarthy's big hand came up holding a gorgeous string of matched pearls.

"So that's it, you Derby lads!" he snapped. "Them's what I seen yuh bringin' out an' pokin' away, an' then duckin' back into the museum!"

McCarthy's hands enclosed the wrists of the two men. Rathbone and Simms sputtered, staring at the traffic man and the others.

"Great Scott, De Gron!" exploded Rathbone. "You couldn't believe anything like that!"

Charles De Gron had a deep scowl on his long, solemn face.

"By the gods!" he said. "I don't know whether I do or not!"

Deputy Henry Bolton could not lose the opportunity to splash himself with some of this apparent glory.

"Right, McCarthy!" he bellowed, gripping one shoulder of William Simms. "It's a smart pinch, an' you'll get promoted for keepin' your eyes open!"

"But you couldn't—You wouldn't dare—" began Rathbone.

Charles De Gron's voice was cold and hard.

"I thought there might be something phony about the robbery of the safe the other night, and now I know it," he said. "Deputy Bolton, you'll have to hold these two men until this is explained. Even if I've got my jewels back again, I'm not satisfied this time."

"No, you wouldn't—" This was William Simms.

"Shut up, Bill!" snapped Howard Rathbone. "Let them take us in! We're attracting too much attention!"

A crowd was swiftly collecting. De Gron summoned some of the museum guards and got them around the famous jewels. You never could tell what a street crowd might do with all of that wealth on display.

Then the somewhat dazed Deputy Bolton got Howard Rathbone and William Simms started for headquarters.

CHAPTER XIV
THE BROKEN SYNDICATE

NEITHER Mayor Van Royston nor Deputy Henry Bolton was aware of the real sensation the arrest of Howard Rathbone and William Simms had caused. There was plenty in the evening editions of the newspapers. The story had been big enough when it had been reported that the De Gron jewels had been snatched from the museum display.

Now two leading and respected citizens were being held, and it was announced that Charles De Gron had requested that bail be denied them for at least twenty-four hours. Mayor Van Royston was talking with De Gron.

"Great heavens, man!" said the mayor. "If we happen to be wrong, this will bust my own party wide open! Rathbone and Simms are among my best friends! They couldn't have possibly been in on that amazing robbery! Why, Henry Bolton tells me the voice of The Whisperer was heard!"

"Yes?" snapped De Gron. "And who has seen or knows The Whisperer? Rathbone and Simms have been friends of mine, too, out in Lakeside! But this is a day when you don't know who to trust! You've even got a commissioner accused of murder and you can't find him! But I'll gamble he'll be showing up within the next few hours!"

Mayor Van Royston stared at De Gron. Plainly enough the jewel collector was in no mood to show any mercy for his friends, with the plain circumstances pointing to them as the thieves of the museum. Perhaps the robbery of their safe had been a fake, was one of De Gron's suggestions.

But the prediction that Wildcat Gordon would soon appear was not fulfilled. At this minute, the police commissioner could hardly have been in a stranger spot.

For he was sitting in a closet, surrounded by mops and brooms and pails. Outside, he could hear a janitor *swishing* a wet cloth and mumbling to himself.

IT was verging upon the hour of midnight. Old

Quick Trigger, still in his role as janitor, was mopping the ninth-floor corridor of the building which housed the Lakeside Development Co. That corridor had never been so thoroughly cleaned.

Quick Trigger occasionally moved close to the door of the cleaning closet. He apparently was humming a little tune. But he made it into words as his keen eyes kept watch on the elevators and stairway.

"Nobody showed up yet, Wildcat," he said through the door. "Maybe we're off on the wrong foot?"

"They'll show up, Quick Trigger," came Wildcat's reply.

The fighting police commissioner was sure he was right. For he had deliberately cast suspicion of the De Gron jewel theft upon Howard Rathbone and William Simms to stir up the other leaders of the crime syndicate or the school for murder, as Paul Brandt had designated it.

Wildcat believed the unidentified members of this school for murder would meet at once for one of two reasons: Either they must aid their companions in gaining freedom, if they believed them innocent, or they would seek to devise some punishment in a theft of jewels which must have appeared to be a double-cross.

Wildcat grinned to himself. As The Whisperer he had thrown a bombshell into the top ranks of the crime syndicate. He was remembering that the loyal Tim McCarthy, traffic policeman, had a special reward coming for his part in confusing the criminals back of the jewel thefts and murders.

As Wildcat waited, he inserted his odd dental plates and made other changes that converted him into The Whisperer. When Quick Trigger came close to the closet door again, Wildcat asked, "You're still in the dark as to what they've done with Tiny and Eve Willoughby?"

"If I knew where Tiny was, I wouldn't be here," stated Quick Trigger, with a groan. "They might have brought their prisoners up to that damnable gas room some time today while I was off duty, but I haven't been able to get by the watchman inside to find out."

There was no longer a secret in the location of the chamber of hydrocyanic gas. That death room was behind a metal door at the back of the offices of the Lakeside Development Co. Here in this highly conservative business building, Wildcat was convinced at least two persons, Chuck Willoughby and Detective Rotha, had been murdered.

And if Tiny Traeger and Eve Willoughby had been brought to that room during the day, as Quick Trigger feared, Wildcat knew more murders were in prospect.

But what effect would the amazing arrest of the

civic leaders, Howard Rathbone and William Simms, have upon the other members of the crime syndicate?

EVEN as Wildcat Gordon was considering what the next hour or two might produce, two court deputies appeared in the police commissioner's own office. Deputy Henry Bolton was striving to emulate Wildcat Gordon, with his feet on a corner of the desk.

Mayor Van Royston had remained at the office. Charles De Gron and several other Lakeside citizens were present, but none was talking much.

"If I could only believe there was some mistake," Charles De Gron was saying. "But it was too plain. Rathbone and Simms are smart fellows. You have told me that Tim McCarthy is an honest policeman."

"If Tim McCarthy said he saw them put the jewels in their car, then they are guilty," stated Deputy Henry Bolton emphatically. "It probably will help us clear up all of these Lakeside robberies."

Deputy Bolton saw himself riding to the glory of a commissionership on the arrest of Rathbone and Simms. He had even suggested that The Whisperer had been a part of the burglar gang, and that it was men like these supposedly respectable citizens who had kept The Whisperer out of his hands for many months.

The two court deputies listened to the conversation, then one grinned and presented his papers. The court had issued a habeas corpus for the immediate release of Rathbone and Simms, accepting their own recognizance in lieu of bond, as both were extensive property holders.

Charles De Gron exploded with wrath, the white scar over his eye flashing like a danger signal.

"You don't dare to release them, even if they are prominent citizens!" he raged. "Think of it, Mayor Van Royston! The death of my wife goes back to the men behind these thieves, and if Rathbone and Simms are playing with them, then they are responsible for the murder we have had!"

Mayor Van Royston agreed gloomily, but he reluctantly passed the word to Deputy Bolton to see that the two prisoners were released.

"We cannot follow Commissioner Gordon's tactics in taking the law into our own hands," stated the mayor. "With Gordon guilty of murder, the people won't stand for anymore nonsense."

Against Charles De Gron's continued protest, Deputy Bolton himself saw that Howard Rathbone and William Simms were set free. Both of these men were silent and they did not go to the office of the commissioner.

Only Howard Rathbone said, "The police department will hear about this!"

Rathbone and Simms left headquarters hurriedly, summoning the nearest available taxicab. After a few

more hot words with Mayor Van Royston, Charles De Gron and his Lakeside neighbors declared they would appear in court in the morning for the preliminary hearing of Rathbone and Simms.

IN the meantime, Rathbone and Simms were two grim-faced men. They spoke but little as their taxicab moved toward midtown.

"I think we should leave the cab somewhere near the park and go to the place by elevated," said Rathbone. "Has it struck you that after the big cleanup we've made, we're being double-crossed out of our split?"

"I don't know," said William Simms doubtfully. "It seems to me there may be something more behind this than our own crowd. We know we had nothing to do with the De Gron jewels getting into the car, but that isn't helping us any."

"It's a damn double-cross!" repeated Rathbone. "Driver, go into the park, and we'll take a walk from there." The taxicab driver grunted and the car headed from an uptown street into the boulevard park near the lake. Rathbone and Simms were too much engaged with their own puzzling problem to keep a close eye on the taxicab driver. That taxicab had been the most convenient to police headquarters when they had come out. Its driver now swung from the main driveway into a deserted, circling side road. Neither Rathbone nor Simms caught the passing glow of a cigarette lighter, under the trees.

The driver turned and said, "How about it, buddies? This place do for your walk?"

"Sure, good as any," said Rathbone, producing his billfold.

The pair climbed from the taxicab. It seemed the driver's elbow struck the button of the horn and it squawked briefly once. The taxi spewed gravel from its rear wheels and shot away.

Its red lights was winking from sight when two unmasked men, both with young, hard faces, stepped squarely into the path before Rathbone and Simms.

"Stick 'em up!" grated a voice.

RATHBONE and Simms could almost feel the movement of other figures behind them. Simms looked into the two faces of the apparent holdup men.

"Carter! Jammer!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea? What are you fellows doing here?"

It was clear enough he knew the holdup men. But no recognition came to the hard faces of the men who held cumbersome-looking pistols.

"Shut up, and walk out under the trees!" gritted one voice. "Straight ahead, right over there behind them bushes!"

"I thought so!" ripped out Rathbone. "So it is a

double-cross all the way around! Listen, you boys! You can't get away with this! Whatever you're being paid for the job, we'll double it! See what I mean?"

"Walk out under the trees!" repeated the callous voice, the pistol with its silencer pushing suddenly into the soft flesh of Rathbone's stomach.

"Yes, it's the double-cross, and we know you big eggs would turn all of us in before you'd take the rap! Walk now!"

William Simms started to speak, but slapped his hands down and made a bull-like rush toward the nearest gunman. Rathbone said, "Bill, don't do that! They'll—"

Rathbone's judgment concerning these hard, young mugs who had been called "Carter" and "Jammer," was instantly justified.

Two silenced guns made spiteful crackings under the trees. Howard Rathbone buckled at the knees and sat down on the grass. William Simms continued the rush he had started, but finished on his hands and knees and finally lay with his face to the ground.

The silenced pistols crackled until their magazines were emptied. The slugs pounded into the backs of Rathbone and Simms. Then Carter and Jammer—who, no doubt, were advanced students of the school for murder, tools of the crime syndicate—calmly pocketed their silenced weapons and strolled away through the park.

Four other men who had taken no part in the affair separated into pairs and took other paths.

PERHAPS half an hour elapsed before the headlights of a car carrying a boy and girl chanced to slant across the two inert bodies in the park glade. The girl screamed. A few minutes later the news hit police headquarters with the force of an earthquake.

Mayor Van Royston's first act was to get Charles De Gron on the telephone.

"This is terrible, De Gron, terrible!" sputtered the mayor. "It looks as if these two men were deliberately turned loose to be murdered! They *couldn't* have been guilty! This puts the administration in the worst spot we've ever been in!"

Charles De Gron was then at home. His voice was cold, and he instantly disagreed with Mayor Van Royston.

"Can't you see it, Van Royston?" he stated. "It's proof that Rathbone and Simms have been in with a murder gang! No doubt, their companions feared they would break down and talk too much! These murders convict them as surely as if they had been tried in court!"

Deputy Bolton took another view and said, "It's The Whisperer! I've suspected that all the time! He was the thief, and he killed them fellows to keep them from talking! He was working with them, but

when I trapped them, The Whisperer knew they might spill something!"

Deputy Henry Bolton never neglected to claim credit where he could. Here was an unexpected cleanup and another black mark to be put against The Whisperer.

CHAPTER XV
PAUL BRANDT'S ESCAPE

ALONG toward midnight, as Wildcat Gordon waited in a janitor's closet and Howard Rathbone and William Simms became stark corpses in a park glade, young Paul Brandt made his way down a fire escape to an alley from the hideout where he had been placed by Wildcat.

The youth had given his word to remain there; but hours had passed and his anxiety for Eve Willoughby had brought on a panic.

Paul Brandt gained the street and walked rapidly toward the midtown section. He discovered he lacked even carfare and it was two miles or more to the building which housed the Lakeside Development Co. The youth's right wrist was in splints and he was unarmed, but he walked with white-faced determination.

His imagination told him something had happened to Wildcat Gordon. He knew the commissioner was charged with murder. If Wildcat had been picked up by his own police, he could be of no further help. The gray peddler, The Whisperer, was a sinister figure to be feared, a thief himself who had announced he intended to steal the Charles De Gron jewels.

"I'll get to them some way!" Paul Brandt gritted to himself. "If they've got Eve, I don't care what happens to me!"

As he passed a corner, the youth did not notice that two pairs of hard eyes had snapped over to the sidewalk from a passing car, and that this same car had turned suddenly in the middle of the block and was now following him slowly.

Paul Brandt was debating whether he should go ahead alone, or should attempt to find out if Wildcat Gordon had been arrested on the murder charge.

He decided to find out about that, so he glanced carefully around and ducked into a cigar store where there was a telephone booth. But he did not reach the booth. A night news hawker came into the doorway, crying out, "Read all about it! Two men murdered in boulevard park!"

Paul Brandt saw the headlines, and the faces and names of two men. Howard Rathbone and William Simms, the only ones in the school of murder whose names he could give to Wildcat Gordon.

The youth shuddered as if he were cold and hurried from the cigar store. He forgot for the

moment he had intended finding out about Wildcat Gordon. He had no means of knowing what had happened, but there was a sick fear that Eve Willoughby might no longer be alive.

Now he was without any plan, except the desperate determination to get into the offices of the Lakeside Development Co. He reached a midtown block near the building and halted, seeking for windows on the ninth floor. Sharp lines of light showed around drawn shades.

"They're up there, and Eve's there—"

"Right, buddy! They're up there, and they've been waiting for you to show up!"

The icy voice in Paul Brandt's ear was accompanied by the prodding of a weapon into his back. A car had rolled to a stop just ahead. Two hard mugs had come from it.

"I take it you were going up to see the bosses?" said the voice again. "Well, walk right ahead, Brandt! They'll be glad to see you, too!"

TWO minutes later, on the ninth floor, Quick Trigger was close to the door of the cleaning closet.

"There's three of them gone in, Wildcat," he said in a low tone. "That makes them and their watchman. When you hear me kind of blunder in at the front door an' ask about the wastebaskets, you be ready and— Wait, Wildcat? Here comes three more fellows! Goshamighty! They've got Paul Brandt!"

Old Quick Trigger moved away and dropped to his hands and knees, mopping at the wet floor with his back to the three men who had come from the rear stairway.

From the corner of his eye, he could see the suggestive weapon in a side pocket of one of the men and the stiff manner in which Paul Brandt walked ahead of him.

One of Brandt's captors said from the corner of his mouth, "You'll find the bosses all set! There's been a bust-up and maybe they'll put you… in the little room!"

Quick Trigger's muscles tensed. There was but one little room in that suite of offices—the one with the metal door and the wall holding the gas container. He had no doubt but that Paul Brandt was slated to enter that room, yet Quick Trigger kept on with his mopping until the door had closed.

Perhaps the former deputy tried to picture what was taking place behind the closed office doors, but Wildcat Gordon's order had been to wait until it was made certain the brains of this school for murder had arrived.

At the moment, Paul Brandt was pushed into the back room where three men now sat solemnly at a long table. The man at the head of the table arose and turned his back. But he had not been quick enough to evade the searching gaze of the youth.

"You!" cried out Paul Brandt. "So it's you! It has been you all the time! Now I understand! Now I'll—"

The man who had arisen snapped one hand downward. The two men behind Paul Brandt seized him roughly, one striking him a solid blow with the barrel of his pistol, the other clamping a hand over his mouth.

"Well," said the man at the head of the table, "luck has played with us a little. This leaves only Wildcat Gordon to be got, and this strange fellow they call The Whisperer. Perhaps they will come walking in on us."

The leader of the school for murder did not know how closely he came to the truth. He said, "Put the punk in the little room. It'll soon be a mess for the cops, but by the time they find it, you two fellows will be in the clear and there will be no means of knowing that I have ever been connected with the Lakeside Development Co."

THE small metal door opened and Paul Brandt was shoved through, with his wrists and ankles being swiftly taped. He recovered consciousness lying on the floor in the darkness. First, he could hear the murmur of voices through a door, and next he could distinguish the words of the men speaking outside.

Then he became aware that another voice was whispering close to one ear. "Paul, honey! Paul, can't you hear me?"

"Eve! Thank Heaven you're alive!"

"Is he all right, Eve?" spoke a clear treble.

"Yes, I think so, Tiny, but I only wish he hadn't come. None of us will ever leave here alive. I know it." One of Eve Willoughby's soft cheeks rubbed Paul Brandt's face. She was lying on the floor, bound as he was. Nearby, the doll-like figure of Tiny Traeger was similarly restrained. The room of the hydrocyanic gas now held these three persons.

Tiny Traeger and Eve Willoughby had been prisoners in the room for many hours. Common sympathy had drawn them together and helped to explain their being in the same situation. The men who had brought them there had apparently only been waiting for the appearance of others.

Before Paul Brandt had been thrust into the room, Tiny and Eve had become aware the bosses of the school for murder had arrived.

Now the three of them ceased whispering and listened. They heard the cold voice that uttered their death sentences.

The three men at the table had sent Paul Brandt's captors from the room and the offices. Only a burly watchman remained in the office closest to the outside door.

"We're millions ahead as it is," stated the leader. "We have no further use for the boys, so we will

make the payoff as agreed and none of them will ever dare to talk. This Wildcat Gordon is finished as police commissioner, and we blocked him with that Rotha murder charge before he discovered enough to be dangerous."

The three men had all the appearance of respectable citizens. But the two facing their leader were plainly nervous.

"How about this Whisperer?" said one. "I have a queer feeling he has found out a great deal about us. Could Rathbone and Simms, knowing The Whisperer's reputation, have been hooked up with him?"

The leader of the three men remained cool and apparently unconcerned. His slight smile indicated he believed his clever brain had solved the whole problem of the strange split in their crime syndicate.

"Only Rathbone and Simms could have known enough of our secrets to get into the safe here, so one or the other of them was either playing The Whisperer, or one might be The Whisperer," he said. "None of us has been any too long building up his reputation, and Rathbone and Simms had their records."

The other two men nodded with relief. It seemed a smart solution. The explanation might even have covered the theft for the De Gron jewels from the state museum.

"Then it only remains," said the leader, quietly, "for us to make our final split, turn the gas into the little room, and we will then have removed all the witnesses we may have to fear."

In the little room, Eve Willoughby whispered, "There is no hope left for us. Oh, Paul, if only you had not come here!"

Tiny Traeger said, "Somehow I believe Wildcat Gordon knows, and if he does, something will happen."

The leader got up from the long table. A section of the wall seemed to move and a new and modern safe appeared. Apparently it had been only installed a few days. When the door was open, the three men carried trays from this to the table.

The light in the room played over millions in gems, some unset and apparently newly recut, while others were still in their settings.

"It's really too bad," stated the leader, "that two of us cannot be here. It makes each of our shares a little bulky, but their loss is our gain, and only goes to prove what happens when men become too greedy."

THE leader's hands commenced dividing the glittering jewels into something like equal parts. There were diamonds, rubies and emeralds, with a necklace of rare black opals; worth in itself a king's ransom.

The three men began placing the gems into flat

cases, which would make their removal easier. Presently this was finished and the table was nearly cleared.

"Shall we match for the black opals?" stated the leader.

"Yes, match for them," said one of the others, licking his dry lips. "And the one who wins turns on the gas."

"A good idea," assented the leader. "I'll take heads."

The three men of the school for murder solemnly slapped three coins onto the table. They raised their hands.

"Heads takes it," stated the leader. "There remains only the little matter of the gas. So I'll—"

The sound of a crashing blow and the falling of a body came from an outside office. The three men stood transfixed. There was a groan and another thumping fall.

The single bright light bulb over the table winked out.

CHAPTER XVI
FOUR IN THE DEATH ROOM

FROM an outside doorway boomed the voice of old Quick Trigger.

"You would, wouldja?"

Bone and flesh crunched under smashing blows of fists. The former deputy was rolling on the floor with the burly outside guard of the school for murder. He had pushed open the corridor door and shuffled in with an emptied wastebasket.

Before the watchman was aware of it, the man he had believed to be a stoop-shouldered, infirm janitor had smacked stony knuckles against his jaw. Behind Quick Trigger the door of the cleaning closet had opened.

Now Quick Trigger and the watchman crashed the door of the inner room and rolled to one side.

"Look out!" snapped the voice of the leader. "It's a trick! Give 'em the works!"

Fire sliced from a gun in the hand of the leader, smashing slugs into the vaguely lighted square of the door. Another fist crunched, but old Quick Trigger groaned, "I'm hit!"

Apparently all three men at the table had been ready with rods. It is possible they mistrusted each other as much as they feared intervention from the outside. Now the darkened room became filled with a weird, penetrating whisper it was impossible to locate. "Drop your guns, all of you, or you're dead men!"

The three men must have imagined they had located the eerie sound, for their pistols started pumping more fire, the lurid flashes crossing each other. Outside the door, both Quick Trigger and the

watchman were out cold, or at least they were lying quiet.

Bullets pounded walls and screamed off angles. The leader shouted, "Make for the door! We've got him!"

The Whisperer had not spoken again. The three men made a rush together for the door leading outside, when one man called out, "The gas! Turn on the gas before we go!"

The men hesitated. Still, The Whisperer remained silent, invisible. But one of the three men screamed on a gurgling note. Another man let out only a stifled groan. But the bodies of both struck the floor.

The darkened room filled with a hissing noise, like the release of compressed air. The leader's voice called, "Harden! James! Come on!"

The weird whisper commanded, "Drop your gun and stand still! Your two men never will come on! They are finished!"

THE leader of the crime syndicate must have realized what that hissing had been. Death had struck at his companions almost silently, invisibly. The hissing was from the silenced pistols of The Whisperer.

From the corridor and the offices outside came the sudden pounding of men's feet, the shouting of voices.

"The game's up!" said that eerie whisper. "The offices are blocked in by the police!"

The leader moved fast.

"So that's it!" he shouted. "I was afraid it would come like this! But you'll never take me alive!"

The Whisperer was hurling his body across the darkened room toward the leader's voice. But the body of one of the other men tripped him up, and he stumbled forward. The edge of the table struck his forehead and bounced him to the floor.

The Whisperer was only stunned, and his silenced pistol hissed its death slugs, but he was too late. He heard the soft grating of metal as a small door opened and closed.

Outside, the harsh voice of Deputy Henry Bolton called out, "Find the light switch! Stay back, or you'll be blasted!"

In the minute or so of darkness he had, The Whisperer was forced to work fast. The odd dental plates came from his mouth. His shoes were turned to a yellow and his gray clothes changed to a bright blue serge. Whitish powder brushed from Wildcat Gordon's rusty hair.

The police commissioner was standing beside the long table with a regulation gun in his hand when light flooded the room. Deputy Henry Bolton towered in the doorway, his eyes gleaming over his hawklike nose. Behind him were men of the homicide squad.

He looked at Wildcat Gordon and blinked.

"So, you thought by calling headquarters and tellin' us there was a murder, you'd get away with something more, Gordon?" he howled. "It wasn't enough to beat Detective Rotha to death! Look, men, at the fellows on the floor! They're Harden and James, two good citizens!"

Wildcat Gordon pulled his army hat over one eye. Old Quick Trigger was getting to his feet, with blood seeping from a bullet crease across his bald spot.

"Of all the asinine fools, Bolton, you take the biscuits!" he roared. "Wildcat, did he get into that gas room?"

Deputy Henry Bolton and his men then saw the metal door in the wall. They heard a girl's shrill scream; then came the hard voice of a man.

"Sure, I got into the gas room, and you'll carry me out of it feet first, for I'm turning on the gas! So it's your trick, is it, Wildcat Gordon? Well, I'm going and your little friend, Tiny, and Eve Willoughby and Paul Brandt are going with me!"

"Hellamighty!" ripped out Wildcat. "Break down that door, boys! Bust it open quick! He can fill that room with hydrocyanic gas, and he'll—"

Men of the squad were already at the metal door. One exploded his revolver, hoping to break the lock; but the slugs only flattened and whined viciously back into the room. Gun butts hammered at the metal, but made no impression.

Mayor Van Royston appeared behind the police squad, accompanied by the gray-haired medical examiner.

"Wildcat Gordon?" he spouted. "What is it? Why are you smashing up this place, Henry?"

The mayor's eyes fell upon the two dead men lying grotesquely on the floor, and he gasped, "Harden! James!" The mayor then emitted a very rare oath. Like Rathbone and Simms, these two men had been among his good friends, leading citizens.

"It was Gordon—" Deputy Bolton began, but an unearthly laugh rang out from behind the metal door and made him pause.

"—taking them with me, I'm telling you!"

Every man in the outside room heard the sudden hissing of gas being released from a tank. From behind the metal door the voice of a girl screamed, "No! No! Oh, please help us!"

It was Eve Willoughby. At that, maddened detectives threw their weight against the door.

The gray-haired doctor suddenly spoke.

"Don't do it, boys! You're too late! If that's hydrocyanic, like the stuff that killed Chuck Willoughby and Detective Rotha, it will get us all! We'll have to wait until the room clears!"

MAYOR VAN ROYSTON and the others were staring with bulging eyes. After that one scream,

Eve Willoughby's voice was not heard again. Deputy Bolton's Adam's apple ran up and down his throat.

"You mean, doc," he gulped, "they're all dead in there? A woman and some others?"

"That's what I mean," stated the gray-haired medical examiner. "Hydrocyanic gas gets you instantly. There's no hope for any of them. Who was the man, chief, that turned it on?"

At this instant, the others thought to turn toward Wildcat Gordon and old Quick Trigger. Neither Wildcat nor Quick Trigger had moved.

Even the gray-haired doctor stared in amazement as a slow, hard grin crossed Wildcat Gordon's broad mouth. Wildcat's Texas eyes held no expression. He acted as if the shock of deaths behind that door might have hypnotized him.

He said, "It is finished in there, doc. You may notice, Mayor Van Royston, how quickly they became quiet. Well, your honor, that was what quieted Detective Rotha for keeps—the same dose they fed to Chuck Willoughby for disobeying orders and murdering Mrs. De Gron. That murder was one thing they never expected."

"Wildcat!" exclaimed the gray-haired doctor, clutching one of his arms. "Has this knocked you over? And you, Quick Trigger? Saints in Heaven, didn't you say Tiny Traeger was in there? And that other girl? Or—"

Wildcat Gordon walked over to Mayor Van Royston.

"You've heard what killed Detective Rotha, Mayor," he stated. "No doubt, you think I'm .crazy right now for not getting excited, but it would be a good idea to let the gas clear up a bit.

"In the meantime, four men out of five who headed the school for murder—the syndicate for the Lakeside series of jewel thefts—are dead. Harden and James here tried to shoot their way out when Quick Trigger and I broke in. Rathbone and Simms got their finish in the park."

Mayor Van Royston shook his head stupidly. He muttered he didn't know what Wildcat was talking about.

"The school for murder, Mayor," explained Wildcat patiently. "Five men posed as leading citizens, civic leaders, and trained boys to rob and kill. This was their school, their collection and their splitting room.

"Here was where millions in jewels were concealed after they had been recut. Sometimes they played with private detectives and insurance companies. The last time was a big mistake; so they knocked off Rotha, because they thought he had talked too much.

"WHEN Rathbone and Simms were caught with the De Gron gems, the other three men thought

they were being double-crossed, so they had them taken for a ride. Now the brains of this whole syndicate is in there with the others behind that metal door, and they will be quiet for some time."

Deputy Henry Bolton howled, "This is all some crazy frame-up!"

Suddenly the medical examiner smiled slightly. He had walked over to the metal door and back again.

"I might have known it, chief," he murmured. "All right, let's have a look at the bodies."

It seemed as if the medical examiner himself had become a little crazy in the face of what that gas-filled room must contain.

Old Quick Trigger said suddenly, "I guess, Wildcat, we done pretty good this time. I'll let the boys in."

Quick Trigger walked across the room, took a key from his pocket and slid the metal door slowly open. No man in the outside office spoke. Quick Trigger walked into the gas room and a light came on.

Mayor Van Royston and the others gasped and stared at the four huddled bodies on the floor. The two girls and Paul Brandt might have been believed to be dead, if they had not been breathing deeply and regularly. The brains of the school of murder had fallen near the door, with his face to the wall.

"They'll be all right in a short time," grinned old Quick Trigger to the medical examiner. "You see, doc, having some time to spare, I took a job of night janitoring. I got to thinking maybe you'd like to have a nice, little tank of hydrocyanic gas as evidence in the Detective Rotha murder to clear Wildcat, so I substituted another tank. It's about the same anaesthetic that dentists use."

TINY TRAEGER was the first to open her eyes. The doll-like girl was apparently still dazed.

"Wildcat," she murmured. "Wildcat, I do love you."

Wildcat Gordon said, "Shut up, you little pest!" and walked over to the man beside the wall.

"He'll be all right in a little while, doc," he said to the medical examiner, "but you'd better have a look at him." Mayor Van Royston's mouth flopped open. Deputy Henry Bolton choked and couldn't speak.

"De Gron—Charles De Gron!" gasped the mayor.

"The brains of the school for murder," supplied Wildcat. "Only when he thought of the clever coverup of having his own wife's jewels stolen, the order to Chuck Willoughby did not include murder. In fact, Willoughby was under orders to carry no weapon and to avoid all violence.

"He disobeyed, and De Gron's coverup makes him the real murderer of his own wife. The jewels

that came back to him through Detective Rotha
never were out of the possession of De Gron and
his associates."

Deputy Bolton had recovered his speech. He
glared suspiciously at Wildcat Gordon.

"Maybe you'll be telling me The Whisperer was
working with this crowd? How about them other

robberies? The blowing of the safe up here?"

Wildcat pulled his army hat lower over one eye.

"I'd thought of that, Henry," he grinned. "Someday The Whisperer is going to twist that long nose of yours and get away with it."

THE END

INTERLUDE

This volume of *The Whisperer* delves into the influence of this 1936-37 Street & Smith magazine on DC Comics' Batman, which debuted in 1939, specifically in *Detective Comics* #27.

Batman co-creator, writer Bill Finger, was not secretive about his influences. He cited The Shadow, Doc Savage, Frank Merriwell, Nick Carter, Sherlock Holmes and actor Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. among his major inspirations. Finger also mentioned The Phantom, which many assume to be Lee Falk's pioneering comic strip superhero, who debuted in 1936. No doubt the Ghost Who Walks did have an impact on the formative Dark Knight, but in actuality Finger was a big fan of the 1932-53 pulp magazine, *The Phantom Detective,* which featured a bored millionaire named Richard Curtis Van Loan, who becomes the scientific sleuth and master of disguise feared by the underworld as The Phantom.

Bill F

"Batman was written originally in the style of the pulps," Finger acknowledged. "I patterned my style of writing after *The Shadow*. Also after Warner Bros. movies, the gangster movies with Jimmy Cagney, George Raft, Bogart, I always liked that kind of point of view. It was completely pulp style. Sometimes I overdid it, writing phrases like 'Night mantles the city.' But, somehow, it all seemed to work."

His collaborator, artist Bob Kane, put it this way:

> Bill Finger was a contributing force to Batman right from the beginning, He wrote most of the great stories and was influential in setting the style and genre other writers would emulate….He was a good mystery writer because of his interest in the pulps.

Of course, writing for comic books is a different discipline than churning out pulse-pounding pulp fiction, as Finger readily admitted. It is, after all, primarily a cartoonist's medium.

"However," Finger told interviewer Robert Porfirio, "I do say the pulp style should be flowing along with it.… I was always a nut for imagery. I remember once [Batman editor] Mort Weisinger

congratulating me on a caption because I had a villain coming at Batman. I said, 'His hand was fanged with a knife.' Well, that's nice imagery. But it's cornball, what the hell. But that's what I feel it should be."

One pulp hero never mentioned by Finger was The Whisperer. That Finger read the magazine is an inescapable conclusion. Where else did he get the name of police commissioner James Gordon than by reading Laurence Donovan's hard-hitting tales of James "Wildcat" Gordon, alias The Whisperer? Of course, there's a huge difference between the mature Commissioner Gordon of Gotham City and his namesake, who was young, brash and two-fisted—Jimmy Cagney reimagined as a pulp-paper protagonist.

inger

And there's more to the impact of The Whisperer on Batman than as a supporting character, no matter how central. Much more.

Just as Kane and Finger often dipped into back issues of *The Shadow Magazine* for plot inspiration, they also ransacked the odd issue of *The Whisperer* as well. This volume showcases two of the more notorious examples, *The School for Murder* and *Murder on the Line,* from the March and May 1937 issues of *The Whisperer* respectively.

One element The Whisperer and Batman had in common was their sociological point of view, taken wholesale from the popular Warner Bros. movies of the 1930s, which Kane and Finger readily acknowledged.

An early Batman story was a retelling of Cagney's 1931 classic film, *The Public Enemy.* It appeared in *Batman* # 4 (Winter 1941). The previous issue featured "The Crime School for Boys," which might have been inspired by the premise of *The School for Murder*, although writer Bill Finger gave the idea a very different development, playing up the role of Dick Grayson—alias Robin the Boy Wonder—in order to infiltrate a criminal group intent upon turning young boys into seasoned felons.

Some of Finger's inspiration may also have come from Warner Brothers' *Crime School,* a 1938 Dead End Kids movie costarring Humphrey Bogart. But

School for Murder appears to be a certain influence. This Batman story can be found in Volume 1 of *The Dark Knight Archives* and *Batman Chronicles* #2.

Murder on the Line focuses on criminal activities at the state line bordering the city where Wildcat Gordon keeps the peace. It's as hard-hitting as *The School for Murder*, if not more so. It's full of truck and car crashes—the latter a subject Donovan knew well. A hard-drinking pulpster, he was infamous for wrecking his cars and simply abandoning them unclaimed. So when he describes the way the engine of a mid-1930s automobile would be knocked back into the front seat, or how a double-paned windshield lands in the driver's lap, he was writing from direct if painful experience.

Aside from appearing in nearly consecutive issues of *The Whisperer*, these tough-talking tales are linked by an incidental character, plainclothes detective Jim Mulcahey. Introduced in disreputable circumstances in *The School for Murder*, he returns in *Murder on the Line* in a more traditionally heroic role—a prime example of the morally ambiguous Warner Bros. world Donovan explored when writing under the house name of "Clifford Goodrich."

For *Murder on the Line*, a saga of crime in the rough and tumble world of interstate trucking and hijacking, Donovan delves into the troubled lives of ordinary people of the Great Depression who became enmeshed between the machinations of the underworld and the forces of law and order—not to mention The Whisperer, who operated with impunity in both realms. The challenges of the independent trucker later fueled the 1940 Warner Bros. film, *They Drive by Night,* which starred George Raft and Humphrey Bogart. It may be a bit of subtle Laurence Donovan humor that these men were popularly known as "wildcat" truckers.

Truck hijacking became such a generic plot pattern in later years that pointing to a specific Batman story hijacked from the pages of *Murder on the Line* may be pointless. For there were many such; Finger's "The Cross Country Crimes!" in *Batman* #122 (March 1959) being a prime example.

Pay attention to Sheriff Randolph. He is another incidental character who will reappear in a future story. Like Detective Mulcahey, his relationship with Wildcat Gordon will not always be antagonistic.

Finally, artist John Newton Howitt's dramatic cover for *Murder on the Line* might have inspired numerous symbolic covers for Batman and other comic book heroes. Howitt seemed to prefer stark black backgrounds for his Whisperer covers—a carryover from the paintings he did for the rival *Spider* magazine. This is one of his most outstanding efforts.

Plunge into the dark, rain-swept world of The Whisperer as Wildcat Gordon battles searing crime on the highways and waterways of the nameless

Depression metropolis in the unknown state he is sworn to protect. And does. —Will Murray

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"Crime in the Crystal," our latest installment of Walter Gibson's Norgil magical mysteries, focuses on a mind-reading act of the type popularized by his lifelong friend, Joe Dunninger. One of the 20th century's foremost authorities on stage magic, The Shadow's reconteur was equally familiar with the techniques of mentalists, and ghosted Dunninger's *Inside the Medium's Closet*, *How to Make a Ghost Walk* and *What's On Your Mind?*

Creig Flessel

"Crime in the Crystal" showcases two superb illustrations by Creig Flessel (1912-2008), a comic book pioneer who began his long art career in the pulps: "I think Street & Smith was the first place I worked for. I illustrated a backup feature in *The Shadow* called 'Sheridan Doome.' He was a lieutenant in the Secret Service part of the Navy and wore a white outfit. He had been in a terrible fire and his face was like a skull."

Like his fellow illustrators, Tom Lovell, Edd Cartier and Elmer Wexler, Flessel entered the pulp field through Pratt Institute evening classes taught by William James. "The reason everyone wanted to take this course was because the teacher was the art director for Street & Smith Publications," Flessel explained to interviewer Jim Amash. "He'd hand out manuscripts to the students and told us to illustrate them for a project. If he liked what you did, he bought it. It was a good way of apprenticing."

Flessel entered the infant comic book industry in 1935, working for Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's fledgling line which soon included *New Adventure Comics*, *More Fun Comics* and the first comic devoted to a single theme, the pre-Batman *Detective Comics* (for which he provided the covers for issues #2-18). He created DC Comics' *Shining Knight* strip and succeeded Bert Christman on *The Sandman*, but still made time for pulp assignments which paid better than the early comic books: "Double spread would be fifteen dollars; single would be seven, sometimes ten," he recalled.

The pioneer comic book artist soon moved on to lucrative advertising assignments for Johnstone and Cushing, and later worked for Lev Gleason's *Crime Does Not Pay*, as associate editor of Vin Sullivan's Magazine Enterprises and assisting Al Capp on *Li'l Abner*. Flessel's subsequent work included the *David Crane* newspaper strip, a variety of features for *Boys' Life*, Joe Simon's *Prez* and "The Adventures of Baron Furstinbed" for *Playboy*. —Anthony Tollin •

Murder on

CHAPTER I
WILDCAT SAVES A GUN GIRL

"STEP on it, Mike! That white sign's the State line! We'll make it this time!"

The words tumbled from the tense lips of a red-headed girl who held a light rifle firmly gripped between her knees. The man addressed as Mike was bare-headed. His thick, gray hair dangled in the rushing wind. His rugged face was sternly set as he saw the white board in the slicing beams of the truck's headlights.

n the Line

"We'll beat 'em once anyway, Jerry!" chuckled the old man to the redheaded girl. This is one load Dummy Blatz won't hold up! Maybe you'd best slip that gun back into the load before we get ourselves spotted by one of the road cops!"

All around the redheaded girl and the white-haired driver of the small, loaded truck was the steady, pounding roar of traffic pouring over the grade on six lanes of concrete. Booming trucks with trailers resembling freight cars thundered over the two outside lanes.

Speeding passenger cars zigzagged in and out

A racket held the food supply of a city in its control, and it took all the power of Commissioner Wildcat Gordon and The Whisperer to break it loose!

A vigorous novel complete in this i

By CLIFFORD GOODRI

fighting for advantage on the middle four lanes. Truck engines backfired with explosive reports. The wide halo of light from the city, to which the southbound trucks were conveying their loads painted the night sky ahead of Jerry and Mike.

The redheaded girl wore tan overalls, and her own fiery curls danced in the wind. Her wide eyes were fixed on the white board of the state line,

She took the rifle from between her knees and thrust it back among the boxes piled up behind the driver's seat.

As the white board of the state line had leaped into view, a speeding low-slung, closed car came over the lip of the hill behind the truck. Four men occupied this sedan. All were crouched, staring through the windshield. The speedometer needle was touching seventy. A harsh oath exploded inside the car.

"That's the state line, Capper! Swing it before they get over!"

The command was given in a voice that was hard, flat, incisive. A man in the rear seat pushed open the door to get a clear view of the highway ahead. A tightly packed load of boxes bobbed on

the small truck in front of the sedan, but on the outside lane.

The black snout of a machine gun spewed crackling flame. The man handling the gun leaned from the door of the sedan and it would have seemed he was aiming only at the concrete. But the slicing fire of the gun was gradually lifted.

THE rear of the truck carrying Jerry and Mike suddenly slewed around. There were two explosions, more muffled than those of the "chopper" in the sedan.

"Good enough, Capper!" barked the hard voice of the man beside the driver of the sedan. "Cut it, and swing around!"

The redheaded girl had not let go of the small rifle when the truck skidded and careened toward the rocky shoulder of the outside lane.

The old man beside her emitted a short oath, fighting to prevent the truck from broadsiding across the other lanes. The steering wheel jerked in his hands like something alive.

"Mike! Grandpa! Hold it!"

The redheaded girl's clear voice shrilled above the thunder and hiss of the traffic. As the truck's hood reared over the slight elevation of the road, the girl saw the closed car with its open door.

Already the heaving of the truck's front seat was throwing the redheaded girl to one side, threatening to precipitate her slender figure onto the concrete under the wheels of the onrushing traffic.

This did not prevent her seeing clearly the vomiting machine gun, the face behind it in the open door. The girl's overalled legs hooked around the gear shift and she whipped the light rifle around.

The girl pumped the repeater twice before she started falling and twice more after she had struck the highway, rolled to one side and discovered herself to be unhurt. At this instant, the redheaded girl could hear the awful, grinding crash of the truck from which she had been thrown.

The box-laden vehicle shot over the road shoulder, toppled and dived into the ditch with the gray-haired man apparently still in the seat.

"Mike! Oh, Mike!" sobbed the redheaded girl, scrambling to her feet, the rifle still gripped in her small hands.

Back in the sedan, the machine gunner pitched from the open door. His body somersaulted and struck flat on its back, and the chopper bounced on the concrete. He lay perhaps fifty yards back of the point where the truck's crash was still echoing over the highway.

"Swing it! Capper's done!"

The man beside the driver of the sedan gave his order. The rear door slapped shut and the closed car shot on down the hill, picking what looked like a

suicidal chance to curve off into one of four branching side roads at the foot of the hill. The gunner still lay where he had fallen, without motion.

It might have been considered strange that the drivers of other trucks continued to roll their donut-like tires toward the city and away from it. Those close enough to see the crash also had seen that ripple of chopper flame.

Plainly enough, other truck drivers wished no part of this "accident." They had seen other similar "accidents." Some had been involved in such crashes. Becoming a witness might hold up a trip, and the court fee was hardly worth it.

Chiefly, though, if a driver became a witness, he might not again drive a booming "red-ball" freighter on this six-lane highway. The big trucks continued to roll. Passenger car drivers seemed equally disinclined to risk stopping on the state line hill. They were citizens with business of their own.

Possibly another driver lay down there on the rocks, crushed under his load. That dark, huddled figure lying on the concrete no doubt was a dead man. Well, the passenger car drivers desired very much to stay alive and healthy. Perhaps they could picture themselves lying in the highway in that same grotesque posture of death.

ONLY one car among all of the rushing six-lane stream was being stopped. Its driver seemed to have been following closely behind the truck and the closed sedan. His green coupé, however, was behind another truck when the shooting started.

The driver of the coupé was gaudily dressed in a blue serge suit, with a flaming red necktie. A red carnation was in his buttonhole and an army hat was pulled low over one eye. The first crackle of the chopper caused him to risk a smash-up and swing the coupé out into the middle lanes of traffic.

There the man in the army hat jammed his foot-brake down hard, causing rubber to scream and burn. The little car slewed around, shot between two other cars and rolled across the nose of a ten-ton truck before it was halted on the outside shoulder of the road.

The gaudily dressed man in the army hat jumped out. He was followed by an older man whose bare head was bald except for fringes of gray hair over his ears.

"Right on the line and a wash-out!" rapped the man in the army hat. "Hellamighty! Looks like another funeral, maybe a couple of them!"

The man in the army hat was fast on his feet. He ran along the shoulder of the road. The older man grunted and lumbered after him. The redheaded girl had slipped quickly over the edge of the rock and was tearing desperately at splinters of the

boxes with small, white hands. A tiny thread of blood trickled from her temples and ran over a few freckles on her white cheeks.

In her confusion, it is likely the girl had not seen clearly what had become of the closed car. She might possibly not have known the effective result of her own shooting.

The man in the army hat had whipped a revolver into one hand as he ran, and the older man behind him also brandished a weapon. Both were watching the rolling traffic, unsure if the gangster car had made its getaway.

The redheaded girl beside the truck saw the two men appear above her. The rifle was at her feet and she caught it up. Its muzzle spat fire twice before the hammer clicked.

Bullets skipped between the man in the army hat and his older companion. The girl had mistaken them for two of the men who had wrecked the truck.

The man in the army hat swore under his breath, dropped flat as if he might have been hit, then rolled over the rocks. He bounced to his feet, caught the girl's wrists and wrested the rifle from her hands.

"It's all over!" he snapped. Then he saw the girl's red curls, the tears filling her brown eyes. "Great Scott! Little Jerry Connors! It was good shootin', and you pegged that mug up there in the road! Who's in the wreck? Not your granddad, Mike?"

The redheaded girl's nerve then broke completely.

"Yes! Yes! It's Mike! They got him! Dummy Blatz got him! Please, I thought I heard him in there!"

The man in the army hat looked at the splintered wreckage which, luckily, had not caught fire. The motor had been jammed back into the seat. All of the load had catapulted into the ditch. It seemed impossible anyone could be alive in that.

But the man in the army hat said, "You go up on the highway with Quick Trigger, and I'll have men get at this in the next few minutes."

"No! Please, I must help! I've got to get Mike out of there!"

The bald-headed older man who had been called "Quick Trigger" took hold of the girl's right arm gently.

"Reckon it'll be best if you come a piece with me," he suggested.

At that instant, the traffic on the six-lane highway went into a sudden, screaming snarl that was stopping all cars. The piercing sirens of motorcycle patrolmen and their insistent blocking of the highway caused reluctant drivers to brake down.

"Take care of her, Quick Trigger!" directed the man in the army hat. "Stay with him, Jerry! That's the county patrol. I'll have your granddad out of there in a jiffy!"

THE man in the army hat sprang into the highway, threading between the halted cars with their swearing drivers. Three uniformed county highway patrolmen had at last blocked traffic away from the corpse on the concrete. The man in the army hat saw that several cars must have run over the body, rolling it to one side.

While the three patrolmen were starting to examine the corpse, the man in the army hat scurried quickly along the ditch. He wanted that machine gun.

He circled the spot where the body lay. Then he knew it was useless to continue the search. Someone, and it might have been a man from any of a hundred cars or the mobsters in the original car, had removed the wrecking weapon.

A county patrolman was swearing and pointing to a bullet hole in the dead man's neck, to another where blood had spread on the fellow's shirt front. A man ambled over from a roadside stand.

"Saw a young feller on that wrecked truck start shootin' an' this guy rolled out on his head," he volunteered. "That young feller shot him again after he hit the road."

A car was sirening its way through the blocked traffic and a squad of half a dozen men came up. A tall, angular-looking man headed this small procession and with him was a grumbling fat fellow carrying a doctor's medicine case.

The angular man wore a sheriff's badge on his vest. He pushed the county patrolman aside. After one look, he said, "Another one, huh? I suppose you're tellin' me it's the same as the others? Handed 'im the works, an' got away? Give him the once-over an' get him off the road, doc."

"This time the killer didn't get away fast enough, sheriff," announced one of the county patrolman. "Abe, here, from the filling station, says a young fellow on that smashed truck done that shootin', and he's still down there by that truck somewhere."

"What? Got one at last?" snapped the sheriff. "Well, what are you standin' here for? Go down there and bring him up! It's about time we pinned a murder rap on somebody!"

The man in the army hat had stayed outside the circle around the corpse. He stepped away from the others, out to the shoulder of the road. The girl he had called Jerry Connors was still near the wrecked truck, with one of the older man's hands comfortingly on one shoulder.

There was no doubt but that this Abe, the man from the filling station, had spoken the truth. The redheaded girl was the "young feller" who had gotten the mobster. The angular sheriff had someone on whom he could at least attempt to pin a murder rap.

Two country patrolmen and the sheriff himself

started down the highway toward the wrecked truck—the place where Jerry Connors was standing.

The man in the army hat glanced once more at the dead man on the highway, as if he were making sure of the corpse's position.

His eyes under his drooping army hat were cold and almost colorless. They flashed around and took in the position of the redheaded girl and the older man alongside of her.

THE sheriff and the two patrolmen moved briskly, followed by the surge of the crowd. The angular guardian of the county peace let out a short oath of elation as he saw the redheaded girl in the tan overalls, though he did not yet know the "young feller" was feminine.

"All right, boys!" directed the sheriff. "Bring the killer up here where we can have a look at him!"

The two patrolmen went over the shoulder of the road. The old man beside the redheaded Jerry Connors had put one arm protectingly around her. One of the patrolmen saw the light rifle on the ground and reached to pick it up.

"Don't touch that gun!" spoke a voice, with a cold edge. "And you're not arresting anyone, either. Perhaps the young fellow you think you're looking for is little Miss Jerry Connors here! Possibly she drilled that Dummy Blatz thug up there on the highway, but you'll not touch either her or the gun! Both of them are now in my custody!"

The angular sheriff stepped forward as the patrolmen hesitated.

"By all that's holy!" he roared.

"Wildcat Gordon! Well, I don't know what you're doing here, an' you may be police commissioner down in the big town, but murder's murder up in my county! So we'll get along without your butting in!"

The man in the army hat had planted his short, stocky figure in front of the redheaded girl. One cold eye surveyed the sheriff from under his army hat.

"You run your own game in your own county, Sheriff Randolph," he said, quietly. "But you happen to be in my county, inside my city limits now. Have a look at the state line, sheriff."

CHAPTER II
THE SMART DUMMY BLATZ

"THE state line be damned!" shouted the angular sheriff. "I've got a man full of bullets! See where he is, Mr. Wildcat Gordon! And that's murder! Now the boys will take her!"

James "Wildcat" Gordon, commissioner of police, former army officer whose rough-and-ready methods had made his city a "hot spot" for underworld racketeers, flicked a petal from the red

carnation in his buttonhole. But the noted fighting commissioner did not change his position.

"If the boys attempt to lay a hand on Miss Jerry Connors, someone will be hurt, Sheriff Randolph," he stated quietly. "You will take note that Jerry Connors is now on *my side* of the state line. The skid marks of the truck show it was on this side of the line when its tires were shot by the Dummy Blatz thug lying up there in your county. I have taken Jerry Connors into my custody, pending an investigation, and you can have that dead rat up there with my best wishes."

The angular Sheriff Randolph himself strode toward Wildcat Gordon.

"Murder's murder in my county!" he bellowed. "I've got the corpse to prove it, ain't I? I've got a witness who saw the shootin', an' all we've got to do is match the bullets from that rifle layin' there! Your city limits may end at the state line, but my duty calls for me to put this rap where it belongs!'

The sheriff bent his tall figure to pick up the rifle. The right hand of Wildcat Gordon hardly seemed to move, but the bigger man shot forward and crashed to the ground. Wildcat Gordon then picked up the rifle and passed it on to the older man called Quick Trigger.

Quick Trigger had earned that name because of his record as a fast-shooting deputy commissioner of police. His name was Dick Traeger and he was in his sixties, having been retired. For many years, he had been almost a father to this fighting Wildcat Gordon, now the commissioner of police. Wildcat resided with Quick Trigger in his city penthouse.

THE patrolmen who had come with their sheriff over the state line made a quick movement as Wildcat Gordon upset their official boss.

Quick Trigger drawled, "I reckon I wouldn't do it, boys," and the rifle covered the pair.

The patrolman halted. It seemed incredible that they could be in danger, but the reputations of Wildcat Gordon and old Quick Trigger, as they knew them, were no assurance that the quiet old ex-deputy would not pull the trigger.

Sheriff Randolph scrambled to his feet, cursing and glaring.

"I'll have my deputies clean you up for—"

"Just a minute, Sheriff Randolph," interrupted the calm voice of a short, thick man who had accompanied him to the scene in the county squad car, "As assistant district attorney, I am compelled to advise you that Commissioner Gordon is within his rights. It may be a funny situation, but while you've got a *corpus delicti* in a murder case, it seems plainly evident the suspect here was not in either your state or county at the time the murder was committed. Perhaps we can extradite the girl later."

"Extradite? Extradite?" yelled Sheriff Randolph. "Do you suppose for one minute if the shoe was on the other foot, Wildcat Gordon would stop to extradite?"

"I judge Wildcat Gordon wouldn't," said the assistant D.A. dryly. "But I would hardly advise you to use Wildcat Gordon's methods, sheriff."

A hard grin crossed Wildcat Gordon's broad mouth. He directed Quick Trigger to remove the redheaded Jerry Connors to their coupé. A few minutes later, the unconscious, but still living Mike Connors had been removed from the debris of his crashed truck.

THE raging wrath of Sheriff Randolph, with a *corpus delicti* on his hands, and the known killer held by the order of Wildcat Gordon over in another state and city, would have not been in the least appeased had he known the reason for Wildcat Gordon's being so opportunely at the state line.

For Wildcat Gordon had at that moment no less than a score of his best detectives, armed and instructed to shoot first, riding some of the trucks that boomed along the highway of the other state each hour of the twenty-four.

Wildcat Gordon had his own ideas of jurisdiction and justice, and he had his reasons for believing Sheriff Randolph and his deputies had been none too enthusiastic about enforcing the law on their own side.

"Dummy" Blatz was the answer to all of this. The reason why Michael Connors was lying near death. The reason why other truck drivers had died. For Dummy Blatz was not so-called because he was dumb.

Driven out of the rackets inside Wildcat Gordon's own immediate jurisdiction of the city, Dummy Blatz had cleverly figured out a way to continue a career of crime beyond the state line. It was simple enough.

Much of the big city's food supply rolled along that six-lane highway from the other state. So Dummy Blatz had quietly moved his own residence and his mob into the adjoining state. Thus clear of the rough and direct methods of Wildcat Gordon, Dummy Blatz prospered.

Trucked foodstuffs for the big town became his specialty. The owners of truck lines felt the weight of the racketeer's hand. The drivers of food trucks either were employed by Dummy Blatz or they were employed by those who paid protection to the mobster.

Dummy Blatz had a mouth that looked and acted like a clamshell. No small part of his personal success was mixed up with the vengeance upon Wildcat Gordon. A few million persons paid more for various brands of foods, all the way from

cabbages to eggs, because of the toll levied by the smart racketeer.

Michael Connors, as Wildcat Gordon learned the story from his redheaded, pretty granddaughter, had attempted in his own way to beat the Dummy Blatz racket and bring food to his store in an old-fashioned neighborhood. Michael Connors himself was an old-timer.

His customers could not afford to pay the exorbitant prices the racket had forced upon most of the city. So Michael Connors had taken his small truck, and with his granddaughter had tried the running in of his own supply.

Wildcat Gordon was convinced that Sheriff Randolph and his men were little protection for the city-bound trucks. Was not Dummy Blatz now a resident of Sheriff Randolph's county?

The tight-mouthed racketeer had a big estate down by the river that also marked the state line. Here Dummy Blatz had been residing for months in armed security, legal evasion and murder luxury. There was no doubt but that the murdered thug on the road was one of Dummy Blatz's mobsters. But Dummy Blatz was a heavy taxpayer.

On the highway, a doctor said that Michael Connors had a chance to live. A few minutes after this, Wildcat Gordon had the redheaded Jerry Connors between him and old Quick Trigger in the small seat of his coupé.

The last threat he had heard from Sheriff Randolph was that he would make an immediate court appeal for the extradition of the girl who had, without doubt, ended the career of the gunman across the state line.

Wildcat Gordon's reply to that had been, "Perhaps I'll trade you Jerry Connors for Dummy Blatz," though he would have done nothing of the kind.

WILDCAT drove rapidly as the green coupé entered the city. He chose streets that verged into an unsavory neighborhood of tenements and brothels. The character of the district caused Jerry Connors to exclaim.

Wildcat Gordon grinned.

"Just taking a roundabout way," he explained. "I'm not sure you haven't been spotted, Jerry. We have done our best, but still Dummy Blatz has a few of his men hanging out in town. I'm dropping you down here with Quick Trigger, and he'll see that you get home."

Wildcat had been aware that another car was following the green coupé. It had separated from others on the six-lane highway. At this moment it was in the same block, but keeping a cautious hundred yards behind. There was little traffic along this narrow street.

Wildcat suddenly shot the coupé forward. He

noted in the windshield mirror that the other car immediately picked up speed A street lamp showed the two hard faces of men in the front seat of the other car. He judged instantly that Dummy Blatz had had his own men in the crowd back at the scene of the wrecked truck.

Perhaps they were intending to make it unnecessary for Sheriff Randolph to take all the trouble to have Jerry Connors extradited.

Wildcat Gordon swerved the coupé abruptly into a still narrower side street. For the moment, he was lost to view of the shadowing car.

"Slip under the wheel, Quick Trigger!" he rapped out. "Stay by Jerry and go with her to her grandfather's store! If anything unusual shows up, telephone me! Take it, Quick Trigger."

The change required no more than three seconds. Then Wildcat directed, "Swing around two blocks and come back by here, Quick Trigger! After that, you will not be followed!"

Wildcat was out of the coupé and in the entrance to a doorway when the shadowing sedan passed, coming around the corner. According to his instructions, Quick Trigger would again pass this spot in about four to five minutes.

Wildcat Gordon had been a gaudily dressed, flamboyant figure in his blue serge suit, his red necktie and army hat. Hardly had the coupé turned a corner and the trailing car passed than a queer, gray clad little man stepped into view.

His clothes were of the same subdued shade from his hat to his shoes. His hair showed only as a whitish blur under a round brimmed hat, a direct contrast to the slanted army hat Wildcat Gordon usually wore.

This gray man's mouth had a long upper lip, and his chin was oddly pointed. The contour of the whole face was changed by that single feature, and it had been simply accomplished.

Wildcat Gordon had transformed his clothing, then slipped oddly shaped dental plates into his mouth. Those plates had been devised by old Quick Trigger, who since leaving the department had made a specialty of disguises.

Strangely enough, those dental plates alone gave Wildcat Gordon a new character as well as a changed appearance. For with those plates he could use only two tones of voice: either a low, husky

monotone or a sibilant, penetrating whisper.

But it was a whisper that once heard never was forgotten. A whisper of vengeance—just vengeance—that had caused it to become a fearsome legend of the underworld. The legend of a reputedly diabolical figure that appeared and vanished, never identified by any man, but leaving a trail of terror among criminals, often of death itself.

The underworld knew this man only as The Whisperer.

NOW the little, gray man standing there in the shadows was The Whisperer. Inconspicuous, harmless in appearance, The Whisperer's hand, nevertheless, caressed one of the deadliest and most silent weapons ever devised.

He had waited no more than a minute before his green coupé with Quick Trigger at the wheel turned the nearest corner. The Whisperer could see Quick Trigger's apparently nearsighted eyes searching the shadows for him. But The Whisperer did not make his presence known, for the trailing sedan had also turned the corner.

The Whisperer was flattened against the wall of a building. He heard a curse from one of the men in the bigger car.

"What the hell are they up to?" came the words following the oath.

Then the larger car was suddenly speeded up. Quick Trigger's maneuvering by driving around two blocks had at last aroused suspicion of the mobsters, who were undoubtedly seeking to trail the girl to her place of residence.

"Go get 'em!" said a voice in the large car. "Damn Wildcat Gordon! He's up to something! He's spotted us! Crowd 'em to the curb! We'll grab 'er!"

The coupé was half a block ahead. The bigger car shot forward as the driver stepped on the gas. In The Whisperer's throat came a weird, ghostly chuckle. The shadowers could not have served his purpose better.

He saw there were five men in the car. One man in the front seat was lifting what appeared to be a sawed-off shotgun. The driver was stepping on the gas.

The Whisperer's hand lifted. The narrow street was filled with what might have been the sharp sighing of the wind, only it was a human voice making words.

"You have gone too far! The Whisperer speaks! Your time has come!"

Instantly, it seemed as if the words themselves must have caused the driver to send the big car careening across the sidewalk and crashing into a brick wall. But in the hand of The Whisperer there was the slow hissing as of compressed air escaping.

The Whisperer's silenced, deadly automatic had spoken, as well as his voice. Down the street the green coupé was unfollowed.

CHAPTER III
WILDCAT DEFIES THE LAW

LESS than an hour after The Whisperer had appeared in a tenement street and a homicide squad was attempting to solve the riddle of two dead men in a crashed car, another man was on a private telephone in an underworld hangout.

"I tell you, Dummy, we heard The Whisperer just before Soaker let go of the wheel and grabbed at his neck, as if somethin' had stung him," this man was saying. "That damned whisper went right down the back of my neck. It said, 'You have gone too far. Your time has come.' I ain't foolin', Dummy. And we lost track of the girl that bumped Capper."

Over the telephone wire, which undoubtedly came from the other state across the river, the flat, hard voice of Dummy Blatz spoke:

"You're cockeyed, but if it was The Whisperer and he's trying to muscle in on our business, then we'll rub him out! You find the girl that rubbed out Capper! I've got a line she's a kid that lived with old Mike Connors over at his store! Now check up on it, and quit listenin' to ghosts!"

In the meantime, Police Commissioner Wildcat Gordon had made certain, by telephone, that red-headed Jerry Connors and Quick Trigger had arrived safely at Jerry's home over her grandfather's store.

Wildcat directed Quick Trigger to remain on guard. He learned that Jerry Connors had been informed from the hospital that her injured grandfather had some chance to live.

Shortly after that telephone conversation, Wildcat Gordon headed toward his headquarters office. He needed no words to be told that some official trouble was waiting for him.

The trouble appeared as he opened the door of his office. It was in the very dignified person of a man who always held up his head to conceal his lack of chin. This fellow wore a silk "topper" and correct evening attire. Very apparently, he had just come from some society affair of the evening.

He was Mayor Van Royston, reform executive of the city, and his relationship with his police commissioner was about as friendly as that of a cat with a strange bulldog. His commissioner of police

had been wished onto him by the edict of a reform party committee that wanted results against crime.

"So you've got back at last!" began Mayor Van Royston. "What kind of a mess is this you've got us into, Commissioner Gordon? I am told you deliberately kidnapped a murderess from the hands of the proper authorities. Some gun girl or other, a road bandit who shot a respectable citizen in a holdup. Sheriff Randolph has had Governor Mattock get me on the wire. Our police department protecting a gun girl!"

Wildcat Gordon first walked over, sat down and swung his yellow shoes onto one corner of his desk. He squinted his almost colorless eyes over these at the mayor and another man.

"I suppose your friend, Attorney Pearsall, came along to advise me I am legally in the wrong?" said Wildcat mildly, punching tobacco into his scrubby pipe and emitting an odorous cloud.

ATTORNEY HOMER J. PEARSALL was more dignified than Mayor Van Royston, mostly because his chin was aggressive and his forehead bulged. He was equally silk-hatted. He did not appear to regard Wildcat's remark as important, for he rubbed his hands together and smiled graciously.

"Too bad, Commissioner Gordon, but that's what I'm compelled to inform you," he stated. "In the case of a state line shooting—and I refer to court records of a sister state—it was held that the enticement of the victim to a point where the bullet traveled over the state line—"

"Sure!" interrupted Wildcat, rubbing a thumb over his red carnation. "The bullet became interstate commerce and as such was subject to regulation of the railroad commission, or would it be the Federal aircraft department?"

Attorney Pearsall adjusted his glasses and continued to rub his hands. He still smiled.

"I'm not being humorous, Commissioner Gordon," he said. "I have advised Mayor Van Royston that this girl, Jerry Connors, should be turned over to Sheriff Randolph at once at the request of Governor Mattock. Governor Mattock is one of our biggest reform party supporters in his state. Gordon, you can't go to fooling with state lines."

"No, Commissioner Gordon, I won't have any crossing of state lines and getting us involved," added Mayor Van Royston. "Might I inquire what, if any business, took you over into Sheriff Randolph's territory tonight?"

"Sure! Sure!" said Wildcat. "I've got about twenty of my best dicks riding trucks on the other side of the state line, and I was having a look to see how they were coming along!"

"Wh-what?" stammered Mayor Van Royston. "You refuse to give up a killer, insult a sheriff—"

"I knocked him down," interjected Wildcat cheerfully.

"And then, without authority, you detail our men to break the law by going out of their jurisdiction in another state?" finished Mayor Van Royston. "You cannot do it! He can't, can he, Attorney Pearsall?"

"Not under any interpretation of the law," stated Attorney Pearsall. "It lays the city liable, Mayor Van Royston. You should see that all of those men are promptly brought back over the state line."

"On the contrary!" snapped Wildcat Gordon. "I'm detailing another dozen of my best men to ride trucks! Now I'm going to have some important business for the next few days! Sorry, but perhaps I'll not be seeing you, mayor, and you, Attorney Pearsall!"

"What?" again exclaimed Mayor Van Royston. "And what about the Morganston ball? This department has always had its commissioner present with a special detail of detectives to insure the safety of the millions in jewelry that is worn at the Morganston ball! I have given Jasper Morganston my word that you would appear personally, with the finest detectives of the force along with you! That's tomorrow night! Other business will have to wait!"

Wildcat Gordon's cold Texas eyes surveyed his immediate superior.

"The Morganston ball and the reform party vote again, huh?" he said slowly. "The cops put on a big parade because Society Hill is showing off, eh? Well, at this minute I'm also thinking of millions, but they are the two to three millions a month taken from hard-working people because a fat egg called Dummy Blatz is sitting cozy across the river and laughing at any effort to put the bug on him! Too bad the folks buying most of the food in this town didn't get themselves into the social register! Well, that will be all, gentlemen!"

"Commissioner Gordon!" said Mayor Van Royston firmly. "This time I'm going to—"

"Keep quiet while I take this phone call," interrupted Wildcat. "Yes, Quick Trigger?"

Old Quick Trigger was talking from the old-fashioned store of the seriously injured Michael Connors.

"The girl's asleep and O.K.," said Quick Trigger. "But, Wildcat, some more of the Dummy Blatz crowd have spotted the place, I guess. I've been watching a couple of fellows prowling around the block. I told the girl her grandfather's store will have to be closed, and we'll take her to a safer place."

Wildcat Gordon was fully aware Mayor Van Royston and his own personal legal adviser were listening.

"Michael Connors' store will not be closed, Quick Trigger," he stated calmly. "I am sending a special man to open that store in the morning. It

will be kept open in spite of Dummy Blatz. It's time we took the upper hand in this food racket."

Mayor Van Royston stared at Wildcat Gordon.

"You can't mix up the police in the running of any business," said the mayor. "Especially the business of a woman who is wanted for murder. Pearsall, tell him there are certain things in which the police department cannot engage."

"That's exactly right," agreed Attorney Pearsall.

Wildcat's yellow shoes had hit the floor. He was moving out of his office. His cocky army hat came around, and one cold eye was visible over a shoulder.

"Then to hell with my cops engaging in the business of collecting a few votes by turning out in style at the Morganston ball!" he flung back at them, just before the door slammed.

IN less than five minutes, one of Wildcat's fast coupés was headed for the part of the city where Michael Connors had operated a store for his neighbors for more than forty years. From back in the years when men openly traded horses in the side streets, and swapping the horses was the only known racket.

The coupé sped past whole blocks of narrow, old brownstone houses that still housed the families of workingmen. Wildcat Gordon swore under his breath as he thought of the dollars these families were forced to pay to create the millions collected by Dummy Blatz.

He parked the coupé in the block next to that in which the old-fashioned store of Michael Connors showed a faded sign, swinging and creaking on rusty hinges. As he left the coupé, Wildcat Gordon again had become the inconspicuous figure in gray—The Whisperer.

The store of Michael Connors was even more of a survival from an earlier period than other buildings in that block. It was only a scant two-story structure sandwiched between taller neighbors. It might indeed have been a trading post before the reaching city had taken it in.

The Whisperer moved silently to an adjacent corner. There were two street lamps in the block ahead. Near one of these, two men were walking slowly back and forth. This was almost directly opposite Michael Connors' store.

The Whisperer remained motionless until he identified a third shadow over near the store. A light was burning in one upper window of the building. Old Quick Trigger would be up there on watch. The Whisperer came to a sudden decision.

Quick strategy had often saved The Whisperer, confused his enemies of the underworld. Now he was recalling the warning he had issued before he had crashed the car of the Dummy Blatz mobsters a short time before. No doubt, that appearance of

The Whisperer had already been reported to Dummy Blatz.

The Whisperer was himself regarded as a crook, one of the cleverest and most ruthless. At this instant, he decided upon a course of procedure that might serve him later if he desired to make closer contact with the big racketeer across the state line.

Acting upon his new idea, The Whisperer removed his odd dental plates, swiftly transformed his gray clothes to a more gaudy shade and substituted his rocky army hat for the solemn, round-brimmed affair he used as The Whisperer.

Half a minute later, Wildcat Gordon himself clumped his yellow shoes on the sidewalk and swaggered in a direct line toward Michael Connors' store.

For the space of a few seconds, the three Dummy Blatz henchmen in the street must have been nonplused. Then they acted quickly.

One man moved along the line of buildings toward Wildcat. The gleam of a weapon showed. The other pair started to cross the street diagonally. Perhaps they judged this was a wonderful break of luck.

Their reasoning may have led them to believe that Wildcat Gordon was uninformed of their presence. Possibly, he was coming to take the girl, Jerry Connors, to a safer place. Owing to his manner of removing the girl from the state line after the killing, no doubt he would want to keep other police out of the case.

So here was the cocky Wildcat Gordon walking right into their hands. He might be the police commissioner, but he was now alone. Also, he was the source of most of their troubles, the reason for Dummy Blatz having been forced to take up his residence in the adjoining state.

WILDCAT GORDON knew this neighborhood. He tramped ahead as if he had no suspicion of the three men converging upon him. The three were so situated they blocked his movement in any direction as he came opposite the black opening between two old brownstone buildings.

"Rush him!" suddenly grated the voice of one of the men. "Take him alive! The boss would—"

Whatever the boss would prefer was lost to Wildcat. He sprang abruptly to one side, his ground-gripping soles sending him between the two buildings. A few yards beyond was a low wall enclosing a small parking space for cars.

Wildcat's running feet indicated to his three pursuers he was making for this wall. They must have believed they heard his scuffling jump as he went over it. One man raised his gun and cut loose with it, but his nearest companion struck his arm down.

"Cut it, you fool! You want to have the whole place down on our ears?"

The three men had almost reached the wall. They had run under the swinging ladder of a fire escape without noticing it. The man who came hurtling upon them from above was a human wildcat in every sense of the word. Never at any time had Commissioner Gordon given a better demonstration of how he had earned that name.

The darkness of the narrow areaway made Wildcat invisible. His three foes were only bulking shadows when he hit among them. None could distinguish either his features or his clothing. His first straight-arm punch hit crunchingly under one mobster's ear; the man's head hit the brick wall as he went over.

Wildcat Gordon stepped on the fallen man's neck as he dived into the other pair. The metal of a pistol raked along his head and it felt as if it had amputated an ear. But one of Wildcat's fists was buried to the wrist in a soggy, yielding stomach.

The advantage of surprise had so mixed the men that shooting was made impossible. One man felt the ironlike grip of fingers that snapped a wrist bone and caused him to howl and drop his gun. Then the hardheads of the two men bumped solidly together and they slipped to the ground.

At least one man was still conscious, but too groggy to get to his feet. He could not see Wildcat Gordon. He and the others had believed Wildcat had gone over the wall.

Now the one conscious man was convinced they had not been mistaken. For the narrow, Stygian-like passage was filled with a weird, whispering voice.

"Tell Dummy Blatz his time has come! The Whisperer speaks! I will get him and Wildcat Gordon!"

The dazed mobster heard the soft shuffling of feet. He could not make out the figure reaching the street. Wildcat had employed only the odd dental plates for his whispered warning. He was in the store of Michael Connors before the three mobsters recovered and fled from the dark areaway.

CHAPTER IV
SOME OLD-FASHIONED IDEAS

AT the moment a dazed and shaken mobster was relaying news of The Whisperer's second appearance to Dummy Blatz across the state line river, Wildcat Gordon was in an upper room of Michael Connors' store with redheaded Jerry Connors and old Quick Trigger.

"You will open the store as usual in the morning, Jerry," directed Wildcat. "I am sending you a clerk, a dependable fellow, but he doesn't look like much. Now you get some sleep."

When the pretty granddaughter of Michael

Connors had left the room, old Quick Trigger rubbed his bald head and spoke mournfully.

"Wildcat, you're not thinking of playing a lone hand against Dummy Blatz and his crowd, are you? Jerry Connors thinks we ought to call in the police and stake out the store."

Wildcat said, "By this time, Dummy Blatz has heard twice from The Whisperer. Neither time has The Whisperer been seen by any of his men. These three thugs I left in the alley believed they were chasing Wildcat Gordon and that The Whisperer jumped them. They also think The Whisperer is out to get Wildcat Gordon himself. Now figure it out."

Quick Trigger shook his head emphatically.

"You mean you're leading up to horning in with the Dummy Blatz crowd as The Whisperer, Wildcat? That isn't so good. You'll never get away with it."

Wildcat grinned and poked tobacco into his stubby pipe.

"One thing leads to another, Quick Trigger. You get along home to Tiny. You can tell her not to wait up or keep the coffee hot. I'm going into the general store business a few hours from now."

"Wildcat, you mean The Whisperer himself is to be the clerk you promised Jerry Connors?"

"Tell Tiny not to wait up, Quick Trigger."

"Tiny" was no other than Tiny Traeger, the granddaughter of old Quick Trigger. Tiny was a doll-like girl with clustering, black curls and dark-blue eyes, and with but one great object in life: Someday she intended to marry the hard-boiled Wildcat Gordon.

Wildcat would not have believed Tiny's intention, for to him she was still only a child, or so he thought. He might have known there was a reason behind the girl's waiting up until all hours of the night to keep coffee hot for the police commissioner.

When Quick Trigger had left the store, Wildcat made a quick inventory of the place. Once it had been a general store that handled everything from food to hardware. But the hardware had long been stored in a back loft and only foodstuffs were on display.

BEFORE daylight came, Wildcat arose from a brief doze back of one of the counters. He made some swift changes in his personal appearance. When Jerry Connors appeared, the front doors had been opened and a little man in gray, wearing a round-brimmed hat, was sweeping out the store.

The girl asked if he was the man Wildcat Gordon had sent, and he replied that he was the fellow. Jerry Connors very apparently did not regard this low-voiced man with the queerly pointed chin and long upper lip as a competent clerk.

"I'll have to help you out, show you the stock," stated the redheaded girl.

"That will be all right, and you can call me Smith—Dunk Smith," said The Whisperer. "I'll

make out to look after things, I guess."

The little, gray man proved himself competent as a clerk. Jerry Connors told him the hospital said Michael Connors might live. He had a fighting chance.

Morning customers streamed in and out. Suddenly two customers came to the door, turned and glanced along the street, then hurried on. Another customer arrived, paused in the doorway and moved quickly away.

The little, gray man spoke abruptly to pretty Jerry Connors. As always, when he attempted to raise his voice, it became a penetrating, chilling whisper.

"Go to your rooms, Miss Connors!" It was a command. The girl stared at him as the eerie whisper readied her ears. "We are about to have visitors! I will look after this!"

"But if there's to be trouble—"

"Go to your rooms!" again directed the weird whisper.

Jerry Connors obeyed, trying to understand the shiver of apprehension that had come to her. As she disappeared upstairs, she saw the little, gray man who had said he was "Dunk" Smith busying himself behind the counter.

A black, closed car reached the opposite side of the street and parked there. The Whisperer had known that the car was coming. Its presence had been responsible for the quick loss of prospective customers. Only the little, gray clerk was in the store when three well-dressed men crossed the street,

Two came on into the store, and the third took up a position at the door. These men had the tight, slanting mouths that marked their kind. The spokesman had a short scar across his nose and a rattish beadiness in his eyes.

"See you took over Mike Connors' place," he opened pleasantly. "Maybe you just bought it or somethin'?"

The Whisperer's voice was low and husky, but calm enough.

"Nope, mister. Just workin' here on account of the boss bein' in an accident up the road."

"Yeah?" said the man with the scar. "Just workin' here, huh? You wouldn't know then about Mike Connors havin' a payment of five centuries due the association today?"

"Nope. Wouldn't know about that, but I could ask the young miss that hired me, mister."

"Yeah, do that," suggested the other. "But you go up there where we saw her go and call her out so we can keep an eye on you."

"Yes, sure," said The Whisperer, with low-voiced meekness. "I'll call her out."

THE WHISPERER ascended the stairway, but remained in view of the three men below. His

conversation with Jerry Connors was too low-spoken and too fast to be heard by those below.

"You're badly scared, Miss Connors, understand? You don't want anymore trouble. You're paying up five hundred dollars at eight o'clock this evening. You're trusting me, so talk so they can hear."

"Yes, oh, yes!" gasped Jerry Connors. "I don't want any more trouble! I'll get the money, but I can't until later today! If they'll come back at eight o'clock tonight, I'll have it here!"

The girl's frightened words carried to the men below. They heard the little, gray clerk mumble a reply; then he came shuffling back down the stairs. The man with the scar was wearing an evil smirk, but his ratty eyes were sharp. "You ain't thinkin' maybe of callin' the cops in on this, are you, funny face?" he grated. "Because we'll wait all right until eight o'clock tonight, but we're not overlookin' anythin', see? Nobody leaves this store, and you might pick up your telephone!"

THE WH

The Whisperer said, "Mister, this is the first job I've had in months and I'm not wantin' any trouble. Who'll I telephone?"

"Pick it up!" snapped the thug.

The Whisperer picked up the instrument and placed the receiver against one ear. Before the operator could reply, a harsh, mocking voice came over the wire.

"Just letting you know anything you say over this wire will be heard!" The Whisperer replaced the receiver and his hands apparently were shaking. "Just in case you make a mistake and try calling the cops, funny face!" rapped out the mobster. "That phone wire goes right past the room of a friend of ours, and it's tapped, see? We'll spot everyone who goes in and comes out, and it'll be just too bad if you don't have the five centuries to lay on the line at eight o'clock!"

The three men passed from the store, but the closed car went around the block, came back and parked in a new place.

Redheaded Jerry Connors was Irish—and mad.

"I'll go myself and get Wildcat Gordon!" she declared. "We'll not pay those rats a penny! Commissioner Gordon will stake out the place and capture—"

Her little, gray clerk interrupted. "And perhaps gather in a few trigger-men who don't mean any-

thing, and in the meantime somebody may get hurt," he stated. "'I have my instructions from Wildcat Gordon, Miss Connors. You know why your grandfather is in the hospital. Dummy Blatz. Well, what would you to do get at Dummy Blatz himself?"

The brown eyes of the redbeaded girl flashed fire.

"There isn't anything I *wouldn't do* to get Dummy Blatz!"

"Then we will carry on the business as usual during the day," said the little, gray clerk. "I don't imagine we will have many customers."

The Whisperer was correct. The store of Michael Connors had no customers during the long, hot day. The word had gone out through the neighborhood about the three morning visitors. The newspapers had told what had happened to Michael Connors in his attempt to defy the state line racketeers of Dummy Blatz.

ISPERER

The neighbors had known Michael Connors a long time and were loyal to him, but it paid to be cautious.

A FEW minutes before eight o'clock there were few persons passing along the street near Michael Connors' store. The little, gray clerk had turned on the outside lights over the rusty sign. Inside the store was only the single light bulb that hung above the cash register near the rear of the one long counter.

The Whisperer was apparently busy placing stock on the shelves behind the counter. There being no evening customers, there was no reason for other lights in the old-fashioned store to be turned on.

The Whisperer glanced up occasionally, and he could see Jerry Connors' vividly red head bobbing now and then into view. Each time, he motioned for her to get back. He had the five hundred dollars in the cash register and he had told the girl there was nothing to do for the present but to pay off.

Jerry Connors, unable to make contact with her friend, Wildcat Gordon, and receiving hourly reports that her grandfather was steadily losing ground, was beginning to doubt all that this queer, gray, little clerk had told her. She could not understand why he insisted that the money must be paid over to Dummy Blatz's racketeers.

An old .clock on the wall struck the hour of eight o'clock. On the dot, the thug with the scar on his nose and his two companions entered the door. One man took up his station at the entrance. The leader and the other man walked back along the counter.

The Whisperer turned, peering at them with colorless eyes from under his round-brimmed hat. His whitish hair and oddly shaped chin gave him a mild appearance indeed. He laughed a little, keeping both of his hands in view.

"Right on time, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "I thought for a little while the little miss wouldn't pay up and maybe I'd lose the only job I've had in months."

"Cut the conversation!" snapped the thug with the scar. "You would a lost more than your job, funny face! All right, where's the dough? We ain't got all night!"

"Oh, I'll get it," the gray clerk hastened to say. "I put it right back there in the cash register, where it would be handy."

His queer-looking figure shuffled back along inside the long counter toward the rear of the store. Glancing at the lookout at the door, the leader whipped out a gun and held it close to The Whisperer's side.

"Be sure you don't make any wrong moves, funny face! One hand will do to open that register! You keep the other one out on the counter, where I can see it!"

The man with the scar and the fellow with him were walking along the outside of the counter. They were hardly aware that all of the space below the counter edge was in darkness. The old store was a gloomy place at night. At the rear were piled sacks of flour and grains of one kind and another.

Stealing a glance upward, The Whisperer had a glimpse of the bright red hair of Jerry Connors. She was watching the illicit transaction below, and The Whisperer hoped she had not found the shotgun he had taken from her room and hidden.

"Well, make it snappy!" rapped the leader, pushing his gun over the edge of the counter where it was concealed from the street. "This payment makes you O.K. with the association for a couple of months, and then there'll be another five centuries, see!"

"Yes, mister," said The Whisperer mildly.

The metal till slid open. The Whisperer lifted a rolled package of bank notes, transferring them to his other hand. He started to push them across the counter. But he was far enough back that the leader was compelled to take a long stride to reach the money.

The man's legs were in darkness. When he stepped forward, his head flew back; there was a sudden, crunching *click* and the thug let out a roar of pain. The gun in his hand exploded, and it had been pointed straight at the back of The Whisperer.

THE bullet did not find its mark. It was buried in a tomato can on a shelf and the red juice ran out. The Whisperer dropped behind the counter as the leader heaved and yelled. The mobster seemed to be more concerned with one of his legs than further shooting, for his gun bounced to the floor.

The nearest mobster heaved himself up with a frothing oath, yelling this was some damned trick. He was reaching across the counter, getting his own gun on the place where The Whisperer's round-brimmed hat had bobbed down.

Then from the piled flour sacks in the rear of the store four lines of fire were projected into the room, with shattering explosions. Four shotguns fired together can make an ear-splitting blast. Under the counter, The Whisperer had pulled upon a wire attached to a nail.

The first howls of the leader were nothing compared to the screams let out then by himself and his nearest companion.

"Stakeout!" shouted the leader's pal. "They've got me, boys!"

This man's gun was forgotten. Though he had said the guns had got him; amazingly enough he found he was still on his feet, still capable of running, dashing from the store.

The lookout at the door had a firearm in 'each hand.

"Well, damn him, I'll get him!" he bellowed, starting around the end of the counter.

From the rail of the second-story loft an old-fashioned double-barreled shotgun roared once, twice. The lookout dropped both of his pistols to claw madly at his throat and breast.

"I'm done for!" he gulped. "I'm dying!"

But his continued yells did not indicate that he was close to death, and his agility in jumping back for the open door was proof he might live a long time. The other free man was also darting from the door. But the leader was twisting and writhing, clawing at his leg.

The Whisperer leaped lithely over the counter.

"You're lucky to have a leg to stand on," he stated calmly to the leader. "If that old beartrap hadn't been rusty, it would have busted the bone. Now you get out and keep going."

The Whisperer's strong hands pulled open the jaws of the old beartrap he had set on the floor near the cash till. He had known that whoever came would be looking at the five hundred, which still lay untouched.

The leader limped after his companions, as his own gun prodded him in the back. He was groaning and digging at what he may have thought to be death wounds in his ribs.

JERRY CONNORS came downstairs, a shotgun

in her hands and her brown eyes flaming.

"So that was it!" she snapped. "Well, I shot that one fellow just in time to keep you from being potted! But I don't understand how he got away with two charges of buckshot right in his stomach!"

The Whisperer gave an eerie, inhuman chuckle.

"Thought you'd be grabbing a gun, Miss Connors," he grinned. "So I loaded that one with rock salt, the same as the others I fixed on the trap wire under the counter. That's three of Dummy Blatz's mobsters who will live, but for the next few hours they'll wish they were dead."

Jerry Connors stared at this strange, gray clerk.

"It's funny, Dunk Smith," she said, "but you remind me of someone, and that strange voice when you try to talk loud—"

"Never mind," interposed The Whisperer. "Miss Connors, we're closing the store. After tonight, we'll be having every man Dummy Blatz has on this side down upon us."

Then the telephone rang sharply. A voice said, "We are very sorry, but Michael Connors just died."

CHAPTER V
DEATH ON ROARING ROAD

WILDCAT GORDON, police commissioner, looked at Mayor Van Royston and his personal friend and adviser, Attorney Homer Pearsall, but he was not seeing them. Before his vision danced the white face of a redheaded girl. He could still see her placing an automatic pistol in the bosom of her dress, hear her young voice saying:

"Mike! Mike! They got you! Well, I'll get them—Dummy Blatz and all the rest—or they'll get me first!"

This had been the vow of the pretty granddaughter of the murdered Michael Connors when the word of his death had come. The girl's last picture of the rugged old Irishman had been with his white hair streaming in the wind on the seat of their truck. She remembered only his lifelong kindness to her, his heroic effort to defeat the slimy, thieving racket single-handed.

Wildcat Gordon knew then—and he knew it now—that Jerry Connors would become a problem. So, as The Whisperer, he had promised her solemnly, "The war is on to a finish, Jerry Connors. Stick with me and we will get Dummy Blatz."

Then Jerry Connors had looked straight into his nearly colorless Texas eyes and said, "You haven't fooled me, Dunk Smith. You are The Whisperer, and you are a friend of Wildcat Gordon, or you wouldn't have been here."

WILDCAT had admitted he was The Whisperer. Now he was back at police headquarters, whimsi-

cally ribbing some of his police squads because the mystery of a wild shooting in the old neighborhood of Michael Connors store had gone unsolved.

Mayor Van Royston said, "It's all over that gun girl you took away from Sheriff Randolph, Commissioner Gordon. I think you know more about this shooting tonight than you're telling."

Wildcat Gordon inspected his yellow shoes.

"Any man who doesn't know more than he tells is a fool, your honor," agreed Wildcat cheerfully. "About that Jasper Morganston ball tonight and the special detail, I can't be there personally."

Attorney Pearsall rubbed his square chin and looked at Mayor Van Royston as if to say, "Why do you stand for it?"

"Seeing your attitude and, well, certain habits of dress you seem to adopt, perhaps it is just as well you detail some of your best men to guard the jewelry at the Morganstons," said the mayor. "I'll have Deputy Henry Bolton in charge, so you will send a squad of plainclothes men headed by Jim Mulcahey. He's the best detective on the force, according to Deputy Bolton."

"Henry hits it right sometimes," stated Wildcat quietly. "But I regret to say Jim Mulcahey will not be available for the Morganston party. At this moment, Mulcahey and the pick of the department are out for a ride."

"Are you trying to be amusing, Commissioner Gordon?" snapped Mayor Van Royston.

"Not at all, your honor. I couldn't even laugh at myself tonight. Mulcahey and the best men of the force are somewhere up over the state line keeping a few truck drivers from going to sleep on the job."

"Over the state line again, Commissioner Gordon?" said Attorney Pearsall, rubbing his hands. "Perhaps you think my advice of no consequence and don't mind getting the city department into trouble. If anything happens, they'll come back on you, and that means the city will have to pay. I'm my opinion, of course."

"Sure!" rapped out Wildcat. "You and a lot of other lawyers only give their opinions! And most of the opinions we get leave the city wide open to a crowd of unscrupulous racketeers!"

Mayor Van Royston evidently decided he had the support of the law on his side in the person of the dignified and wealthy Attorney Pearsall.

The mayor made up his mind with an outward thrust of his weak chin, then said, "I've changed my mind, Commissioner Gordon! You will appear personally at the Jasper Morganston ball, and you will also change from that carnival outfit you're wearing into the proper evening clothes! Either you do that, or Deputy Bolton becomes acting commissioner by my personal order!"

Wildcat Gordon's Texas eyes roved over to the

tall, long-nosed man with the small, unpleasant mouth who was Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton.

"Congratulations, Henry," drawled Wildcat. "You'll look swell in a monkey suit. Don't let any bad boys walk off with the Morganston pretties or any of the reform party votes. As for myself, I'll be busy."

"So you sent Jim Mulcahey over the line?" said Attorney Pearsall. "Do you know, Commissioner Gordon, if anything happens to him, you'll be held personally responsible for his murder?"

"It looks like rain, Mr. Pearsall," grinned Wildcat Gordon.

His heels hit the floor and the door slammed behind him. The others did not hear his muttered words.

"If Jim Mulcahey's murdered, I'd be responsible. Pearsall hit the nail on the head that time!"

DETECTIVE JIM MULCAHEY was not worrying about any violence being done to his veteran person. In fact, this riding the seat of a big, rumbling red-ball truck was, to his active mind, about the next thing to being a mourner in a funeral procession.

A driving rain had come over the mountains and was slapping across the six lanes of roaring concrete. Big freighters slewed and skidded on the oily hills. Pleasure cars hissed between them at a speed much beyond the line of safety on that greasy road.

The driver of the red-ball truck was young, but he was a good man at the wheel. Occasionally, he glanced at the hard-bitten detective who was shrugging into his coat collar against the rain slashing into the open cab window. Jim Mulcahey was supporting a light machine gun between his knees.

"This stuff may be down your alley, mister," said the driver. "Maybe you dicks being on the trucks will do some good, but it's a cold bet with me that if Dummy Blatz spots a man with one of them choppers, he'll never have a chance to use it."

Jim Mulcahey's broad, red face wore a sour grin.

"You drive your little wagon, fellow," he advised. "I'll take care of the fireworks. If anything starts, all you've got to do is crawl back into your load and stick there."

"That's what you think!" snapped the driver. "If anything happens, mister, it's more likely that load of junk will be all over the back of my neck without me having to crawl!"

The big red-ball truck was pulling a loaded trailer. The name "red-ball" applied to its through load of freight, made up of perishable foodstuffs which must reach the big city before morning. In spite of the rain, the young driver kept the big truck moving at a fast clip.

Passenger autos in the middle four lanes whizzed by in both directions. Their drivers swore

at the big trucks ascending hills, and swore at them for trying to make time coming down. Even a six-lane highway hardly served for both a railroad and a high-speed boulevard.

IN one of the latest model automobiles, a hatchet-faced fellow with gleaming black eyes was behind the steering wheel. The man beside him had a mouth as tight as a closed clamshell and a broad nose that gave his features a flat appearance.

This car was little more than a hundred yards behind the red-ball freighter on which Jim Mulcahey was riding with his ready machine gun. Though it might have slithered through other traffic, the hatchet-faced driver kept an even pace behind the truck.

The man with the clamshell mouth and the flat face was Dummy Blatz in person. His driver happened this time to be his right-hand man, and he could not have employed a more cold-blooded killer.

Joe Koroni he was, but he had had many other names. Murder raps might have been hung on him all the way from San Francisco to Boston, only Joe Koroni, with many aliases, never waited around to collect these raps.

"It's that big red-ball with the trailer, chief," Joe Koroni was saying. "I spotted them when it was being loaded. Wildcat Gordon has Jim Mulcahey planted on it with a chopper. He's one dick that's poison, if you happen to want to hijack that load they're rolling."

Dummy Blatz seemed to open his clamshell mouth only far enough to let his words dribble out.

"We'll not hijack that one, Joe. That was my idea, until I found out Wildcat Gordon thinks he can play over in our yard. This time, we're letting the load go just to teach that fathead commissioner a lesson. Someday I'm getting Gordon himself, and that's a promise."

Joe Koroni slid their sedan adroitly between cars on the slippery road. "According to the boys in the big town, this mug they call The Whisperer seems to have the same kind of yen," spat out Joe. "How do you figure that whispering crook, chief?"

"Same as I figure any egg like him," stated Dummy Blatz. "He sees a big take on this truck racket, and he's making a play to muscle in. You know, maybe it would be a smart idea, Joe, to find some way to drag in The Whisperer and use him to rub out Wildcat Gordon."

Joe Koroni scowled, and his mouth slanted.

"I'd lay off any such screwy notion, chief. You've got your own inside line to this silk-hatted Mayor Van Royston, and it will be only a matter of time until Gordon gets kicked out."

DUMMY BLATZ nodded, but his flat face was

gloomy. The various reports of The Whisperer he had received had left a most unpleasant taste in his mouth.

"You know, Joe," he said, "I don't think there's any doubt but it was this Whisperer who shot the boys full of salt in Mike Connors' store. If it was, we know what he looks like. I'd rather have him working for me than against me, though. He can pull more stuff lone-handed than most of this supposed smart mob we're dragging along."

AT this moment, the big red-ball truck and its trailer topped a grade and dipped down over a rainy hill. The four red eyes of its trailer vanished. Joe Koroni pushed his foot down on the accelerator and the sedan jumped ahead, picking out the narrow space between cars speeding in opposite directions.

Joe Koroni and Dummy Blatz saw only the glaring headlights of one of these cars in the rain, and the shadow of the other auto, for the highway was filled with a steady stream of rain.

Tires were hissing in a high whisper. But there came a whisper that was higher, more piercing, more awesome. It seemed to fill the space around the car containing the mobsters.

"Watch your step, Dummy Blatz! The Whisperer rides the road!"

Joe Koroni instinctively ducked his head, as if that weird, freezing whisper had been the venomous whining of a bullet coming into his open window. His foot automatically left the gas and hit the brake. The sedan skidded and slewed halfway around.

While Joe Koroni had his nerves and was touchy, not so this flat-faced, light-eyed Dummy Blatz. One of the mobleader's blunt hands clamped on the rim of the steering wheel and prevented the sedan from crashing head on into opposing traffic. Dummy Blatz swore sharply and got the car back into its lane.

In the meantime, a dozen cars had speeded past. Up ahead, there was a sudden jam as some convivial motorist attempted to make a left-hand turn against the rules. Joe Koroni pulled himself together.

"There he is, chief! It's that green coupé in the second lane! I'll run him down, and we'll get a line on your much overrated Whisperer! That ain't anything but kid stuff!"

Joe Koroni's foot left the accelerator again as quickly as he had stepped upon it. His brakes were needed this time. Across all six roaring lanes of traffic sounded the metal clashing of fenders, the screaming of brakes, the crash of bumpers and the oaths of many drivers.

Just beyond the lip of the hill where it slanted down a long grade with rocky shoulders on both sides, the mammoth red-ball truck was smashing disastrously, squarely across the width of concrete.

The freighter and its booming trailer completely blocked the road for an interval of seconds, while some motorists shot their cars onto the shoulders to avoid the tons of death thundering upon them.

Into this pandemonium came what might have been the backfiring of some of the cars, only it crackled too steadily, too sharply. At the side of the road, in the rocks, red flashes showed for perhaps ten seconds, then the rocks became black in the rain.

As it swung, the monster red-ball truck continued directly on its way over the rocky shoulder. The young driver was fighting the wheel with all of his strength, but four big donutlike tires sagged and flapped along both the truck and the trailer. There was no holding against that skid on the greasy road in the rain.

The red-ball truck and its trailer started to disintegrate as they plunged over the first of the rocks. The youthful driver was hurled clear of the careening truck, flying through the air and saving himself by a turn as quick as any cat could have made before he landed on the shoulder of the road.

HORRIFIED eyes of perhaps a hundred persons clearly saw the crashing of the red-ball truck, but among these none were more filled with pain than those of the pretty, redheaded girl in a green coupé.

Her small hand caught the arm of the driver and her voice whispered, "Oh, again! The way Mike went! They're done for!"

The girl was Jerry Connors, and the driver was the little, gray Whisperer. The Whisperer was forced to skid his own car to prevent crashing. His strong hands were still twisting the steering wheel, when Jerry Connors cried out again.

"In that sedan! I've waited for this!"

The rear window splintered behind The Whisperer's head. He turned in time to see the redheaded, fiery Jerry Connors jamming an automatic pistol through that window. A big sedan had stopped a short distance behind the coupé.

"Dummy Blatz!" the girl's sharp voice cried out. "Now I'll—"

The Whisperer's fingers snapped onto the girl's wrist even as the automatic spouted fire. The bullets slanted upward into the rain. The Whisperer had known the sedan at which Jerry Connors was aiming was not that of the racketeer. His coupé had passed three other cars since his voice had floated to the ears of Dummy Blatz.

Jerry Connors sobbed hysterically as The Whisperer took the pistol from her hand.

"It would have been a bad mistake, Jerry," he said. "Anyway, I don't want Dummy Blatz with holes in him, even if he had been in that car. You promised to keep your head, Jerry. This time you wouldn't have had a state line to save you. Now sit tight."

CHAPTER VI
JERRY PULLS A FAST ONE

DRIVERS of passenger cars displayed uncanny, cautious skill removing their vehicles from the vicinity of the wrecked red-ball truck. The smashing of big trucks had become too common, too much tainted with gangsterism at its worst, for reputable citizens to linger at a scene of death.

The Whisperer halted the green coupé close to the splintered freighter and its trailer, leaping lightly to the highway. The young driver had cleared the crushing death. He arose, staggering into the road with a thread of scarlet trickling from a cut over one eye.

The driver's gaze jumped this way and that. It might not be the law for a truck driver to leave the scene of an accident, but here was one driver intent upon removing himself as far as possible from the tragedy in the ditch.

He had seen and heard the crackling of the guns as the bullets ripping the tires had snatched control of the steering wheel from his hands.

The Whisperer's gray, misty figure blocked the driver's movement as the rain slashed about them.

"What happened?" spoke the low, husky voice. "Didn't you have a guard riding with you?"

The driver glanced apprehensively around. Less than half a dozen other persons were showing any inclination to approach the spot.

"No! No! I didn't have anyone!" the driver shouted loudly. He was a young fellow and life looked good to him, so he wanted to keep on living.

But he stepped closer to the little, gray man and let low words spill out. "Yes! Yes! There was a Jim Mulcahey from the city cops! Maybe you could help get him out, but it won't do any good! He went out like a light! A slug cut his throat, and the load's all on top of him! Mister, don't you say I talked!"

"Fade out, youngster!" directed the low voice of The Whisperer. "I didn't hear you say anything!"

The driver faded. The Whisperer slid down the rocks into the tangle of wreckage. He saw a hand protruding from a scattered pile of boxes.

Jim Mulcahey had always worn a gold emblem ring. The ring was on the dead hand. There was nothing anyone could do for Jim Mulcahey who had complained this ride was too much like a funeral procession.

The Whisperer glided back to the highway. He could hear the commanding sirens of county patrolmen as they approached. Sheriff Randolph would no doubt be lodging a new complaint with Mayor Van Royston through the governor of his state. At this moment, the spot was not a healthy one for The Whisperer. Those who stuck around would be held as witnesses, perhaps.

The Whisperer whipped back to the green coupé where he had left Jerry Connors. Then he halted a moment, peering up and down the highway.

No one was in the coupé. Jerry Connors, who had so recklessly attempted to gun Dummy Blatz off the road, had vanished. For the protection of his own identity and the advancement of the bigger plan of striking from the inside of the racket mob, The Whisperer eased his little car away from the scene and headed toward the state line and the city.

THE redheaded Jerry Connors was a remarkable quick-thinking, reckless young person. The death of Michael Connors had created the bitter, reckless desire for revenge upon Dummy Blatz. She had listened to The Whisperer and had come to believe the only revenge must be more than the mere rubbing out of the mob leader.

Leaving The Whisperer's car, Jerry Connors ran back along the highway in the rain. She kept to the shoulder of the road as many cars whizzed by, getting away from the scene of the wreck.

Redheaded Jerry gripped her small automatic pistol firmly. She might have made a mistake when she attempted to blast the men in a sedan, but she knew there was one sedan in which Dummy Blatz and Joe Koroni were riding. She had seen both men when The Whisperer had hissed his strange warning on the midnight road.

Had that sedan of Dummy Blatz gotten away, or had it been delayed nearby? Suddenly, Jerry Connors saw it. Joe Koroni had turned the car. It halted briefly as two men came like skulking shadows from the rocks beside the highway. Both men carried light machine guns.

The sedan's rear door snapped open and shut. Dummy Blatz was picking up his planted wreckers and murderers. The sedan started to move. Jerry Connors whipped her pistol into line with the car as it turned back toward a passenger lane.

Joe Koroni was blocked for a minute by one of the trucks stalled by the accident. He was forced to maneuver the sedan out of the jam. In that minute, Jerry Connors dropped her pistol to the rocks. Her fast brain was working.

The girl ran beyond the truck blocking the Dummy Blatz sedan. As she went, she tore at the blouse of her dress, ripping it from one shoulder. Her fingernails gouged into one of her rounded, freckled cheeks.

The Whisperer himself could not have made a nervier or smarter job of it. Jerry's bright red hair glistened in the rain and was pulled in confusion over her pretty face.

She was thinking that Dummy Blatz, as badly as he had wanted to get Jerry Connors for the killing of one of his men, had never seen her. She had been

glimpsed only briefly by three mobsters who had been filled with shotgun salt in her grandfather's store.

That trio would hardly be in a condition to be with Dummy Blatz. The Whisperer had said the only way to beat Dummy Blatz was to get at him from the inside of his own mob.

Jerry Connors had no thought of what might happen to her. In her bitterness over the murder of Michael Connors, she did not care. Now she was again on the glistening concrete of the highway. But she was no longer running.

Her slender figure came into the headlight beams of a car, and at that instant she was walking, stumbling, moving dizzily.

JOE KORONI'S nerves had been given a jolt by The Whisperer's voice. The Dummy Blatz driver was in a hurry to remove the sedan from the place, especially as it now contained the two triggermen who had killed Jim Mulcahey.

Koroni jammed his foot on the gas as he got around the truck that had held the sedan back. The car shot ahead, but before it had gained headway, Dummy Blatz grabbed the wheel, twisted the sedan and grated, "Hold it, Joe! Look out! Hell, it's a dame, an' you hit her!"

Jerry Connors had fallen in the highway, almost under one of the front wheels of the sedan. Brakes squealed. Her young voice rang out in a scream. She screamed again, caught hold of a fender of the stopped car and apparently tried to get to her feet.

Dummy Blatz was out of the car with a jump. He rapped back at Joe Koroni, "We can't stop here! Get ready to move!"

Jerry's face was scratched and bleeding. Her dress was torn near one shoulder, revealing the firm, white curve of her arm. She was still screaming in maudlin fashion. Then her screams became words and the language was such as never before had passed the lips of the redheaded Irish girl.

Jerry Connors could have been mistaken at this moment for the toughest little gangster's moll who had ever been heaved out of a car during a drunken brawl on the road. Her words informed Dummy Blatz that this was what had happened.

"I'll kill him when I find him!" screamed Jerry. "Throwin' me out! Takin' my share of the stickup! I'll get the— "

Dummy Blatz closed a blunt hand over her screaming mouth.

"Shut up, you! Get in here an' be quick about it, or I'll throw you off the road!"

Jerry started clawing at the racketeer's flat face, but quit and started laughing hysterically. Other cars were coming along slowly. The patrol sirens were wailing on the highway below. Dummy Blatz

jammed the girl into the front seat between him and Joe Koroni.

"Step on it, Joe!" he snarled. "Maybe we'll throw her out farther up on the road, but we can't get in a jam here!"

Dummy's hard hand held Jerry, but her maudlin speech bubbled forth. Joe Koroni glanced sidewise at her redhaired beauty. Koroni always had been a fall guy for good-looking dames.

"Maybe we'd better keep her stickin' along, chief," he suggested.

"Get the hell out of here with this bus!" snapped Dummy Blatz. "Say, Joe! I don't know but that you're right! I'm thinkin' maybe I could use the right kind of dame to get that Jerry Connors!"

Jerry was still talking of what she would do to the mythical partner of some stickup or other as the sedan gathered speed and cleared itself, heading away from the state line and toward the river road leading to the guarded estate of Dummy Blatz.

ABOUT the time Jerry Connors started on the ride that had been the result of her own harebrained idea, a thousand lights gleamed in the hilltop mansion of Jasper Morganston. There were nearly as many guests at the famous Morganston ball as there were lights.

More guests were still arriving. In the hallway close to the private ballroom stood an immaculate figure. That is, he was impressive until the observing eye had traveled over his tall figure in its perfectly fitted evening clothes as far as his neck. From this point up the skinny throat, the small, round mouth, the long nose and the low forehead of Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton contrasted poorly with his society garb.

Music for the opening dances had been played. Deputy Bolton felt that he was probably the most important personage at the party. For had he not been notified that he was to be acting commissioner during this latest altercation between Wildcat Gordon and Mayor Van Royston?

Two dozen of Deputy Bolton's own selection of detectives were placed here and there about the Morganston mansion and grounds. All had been togged out in evening clothes to fit the occasion.

Deputy Bolton had a smile on his round mouth, and he nodded to passing guests who stared at him. Perhaps some wondered if they should know him, but when they saw his face hoped that they didn't.

This was a big assignment for Henry Bolton, and direct from the mayor himself. A soft spot, but the proper showing meant votes for Mayor Van Royston's reform party. Henry Bolton stood with his chest thrown out importantly, though it wasn't much of a chest.

The strains of jazz suddenly burst from the

ballroom. Deputy Bolton saw two of his own picked detectives in the hallway nearby. Then as guests moved onto the dancing floor, a tall young man with a pasteboard box in his arms staggered a little on the stairs just beyond Deputy Bolton.

The young man's face was flushed and red. His fumbling, erratic progress and a foolish grin were plain enough evidence the fellow had been drinking a bit too much. His white shirt front was rumpled, but otherwise his evening attire was impeccable. He caught at the banister of the stair and lurched, almost falling.

Deputy Bolton had heard all about these younger sons of the rich folk on the hilltop. This young man looked ripe for either falling suddenly to sleep or creating a disturbance.

It seemed the young gentlemen had the disturbance angle in mind. Holding onto the banister, he waved the pasteboard box.

"Gotta present 'em person'ly!" he announced solemnly. "Goin' in there an' make a speech! Yesshir! Gotta make a li'l speech—"

Apparently, his condition did not back up his intention. He let go of the banister and just missed falling down the remaining few steps. A blank-faced butler was quick to get one of the young man's arms.

"I think I would go out, sir," he said respectfully.

The young man tried to pull away. The butler glanced around and his eye caught Deputy Bolton.

"Perhaps you would help me a bit, sir?" he requested.

Deputy Bolton certainly would. He wanted no disturbance to mar his assignment at the big Morganston ball. The drunken young fellow shook his head owlishly and looked at the deputy.

"As I live an' breathe," he muttered "C'mish'ner! Knowed you anywhere! Goin' to make a li'l speech!"

"If we could put him in his car, sir," suggested the blank-faced butler, "his chauffeur should see him home. He's young Ransome, you know, sir."

DEPUTY HENRY BOLTON had never been "sirred" so much. The drunken young roysterer had called him "commissioner." Of course, he was too far gone to know what he was saying, but that word sounded good to Henry Bolton.

Two detectives were stepping toward them. The music crashed on in the ballroom. Deputy Bolton waved his man back and took the young man's other arm. The butler had said he was young Ransome. The Ransomes were people who counted on the hill.

The young man protested, but permitted Deputy Bolton and the butler to lead him to the front entrance. There he said thickly he would not go out that way.

"One of the side entrances, perhaps, sir," advised the butler.

The young man muttered and waved his pasteboard box of flowers. White roses spilled from one corner. The young man still insisted he intended to make a speech and present someone with the gift.

Two more of Deputy Bolton's detectives appeared, but the deputy said, "Go on back. This is something to handle diplomatically."

It required some effort to get the young man out a side door of the mansion. Deputy Bolton was sure he was managing this very well indeed. Two or three male guests had passed them, but the deputy assured them from the corner of his mouth, "Just a little too much. I'm in charge of the police, so I'll take care of it."

The blank-faced butler picked out this young Ransome's car. If Deputy Bolton had been more alert and less swollen up over "knowing how to handle one of these society swells," he might have noticed the big limousine which drew up had been convenient to the butler's call.

Because of the brilliantly illuminated mansion, the side entrance was in a deep shadow. Still protesting and waving his unwanted box of flowers, the bibulous young man was pushed into the rear seat of the car.

The chauffeur on the seat said, "Sure, I'll take care of him. It happens often. I did not want him to go in."

The blank-faced butler was closing the rear door. Deputy Bolton did not want this moment to pass without some recognition. He stepped up and spoke to the chauffeur.

"You can tell the young man it was Acting Commissioner Bolton who helped Mr. Ransome—"

Deputy Bolton said no more. A blackjack slid from a sleeve of the blank-faced butler. It rapped smartly upon Henry Bolton's skull. The butler sprang into the limousine and the big car purred softly out of the Morganston driveway.

At that moment, a woman screamed hysterically inside the mansion.

CHAPTER VII
WILDCAT IS ENJOINED

COMMISSIONER WILDCAT GORDON walked into a hornest's nest at headquarters. The whole department appeared to be in some sort of major upheaval. Detective Sergeant Thorsen was the first to greet the commissioner. "There is sweet hell to pay," stated Sergeant Thorsen, with the faintest trace of a grin across his wooden face. "Yes," said Wildcat. "I imagined there would be when the news came about poor Jim Mulcahey. I would say it does put me on the spot."

"Too bad about Mulcahey," said Sergeant Thorsen. "But that isn't what's burning up the

works, chief. It seems that the Jasper Morganston pearls and emeralds walked right away from the big ball about an hour ago. Deputy Bolton got himself beaned by one of the thieves, and the story is kind of mixed up."

The story was still mixed up when Wildcat Gordon walked into his office. Mayor Van Royston and his friend, Attorney Pearsall, were listening to several rambling, incoherent accounts given by some of the guests at the Jasper Morganston party.

In spite of two dozen detectives and the presence of Henry Bolton himself, the Morganston emeralds and pearls—valued at around half a million—had been taken from an upstairs room. Deputy Bolton, queerly enough, seemed to be the hero of the occasion, if there was a hero.

"You see," Deputy Bolton was repeating, "I thought I would get to them outside without causing a panic. There were only two men and I had my gun on 'em when another fellow comes up behind and clips me over the head."

Not even Deputy Bolton's own detectives felt like disputing this statement. A few had seen the deputy going out with the butler and the tipsy young man. It had not looked to the detectives as if Deputy Bolton had needed assistance, or even suspected he was escorting the Morganston jewels from the place in a pasteboard box of roses. And Deputy Bolton was not relating any of that angle of it.

One of the Morganston guests had been talking volubly.

"This was an assignment that was to have been trusted only to the police commissioner himself," he stated. "Why was he not there, Mayor Van Royston?'

The guest ceased speaking. A dozen persons in Wildcat's office became silent and faced around. Wildcat Gordon swung across the office floor, his army hat pulled down over one eye. That eye was so cold, it was almost colorless.

WILDCAT'S figure was jauntily clad. His red necktie and his bright carnation were in place. Odorous smoke rolled from his stubby pipe. He planted himself in his big chair and swung his yellow shoes to one corner of the desk.

"Where have you been, Gordon?" demanded Mayor Van Royston, omitting the title of commissioner. "Perhaps you have heard of the fine mess you've get the department into. Attorney Pearsall is representing Jasper Morganston, and he has been instructed to file charges of inefficiency and incompetency against your office. You wholly disregarded my personal order to furnish protection at the Morganston ball."

"Henry seems to have done very well," Wildcat said, calmly. "I would not want to rob him of any of the glory. As for Attorney Pearsall, a brilliant

lawyer might devise some legal means of getting Dummy Blatz over the state line and into our hands, instead of bothering too much about the reform vote on the hill."

A composite gasp went up from the assembled society men. They looked at Mayor Van Royston.

The city's chief executive stiffened and threw back his head so his weak chin stood out. No doubt he had been dramatically prepared for this moment. One hand pulled an official document from inside his coat. He walked over and slapped this on the desk before Wildcat.

"We will forget the Morganston robbery for which you are responsible for the moment," said Mayor Van Royston. "We must also hold you personally liable for the murder of Detective James Mulcahey on the other side of the state line. Acting on the advice of Attorney Pearsall, I have issued a peremptory order through Acting Commissioner Bolton to withdraw all our city men from the other state."

Wildcat touched the official-looking document.

"Yes?" he said mildly, much too mildly for those who really knew Wildcat Gordon. "And this little paper, your honor?"

Mayor Van Royston flourished his hands.

"Our neighboring governor has threatened to take action, Gordon. You are liable both to suspension and criminal prosecution for stepping over the state line."

Wildcat's feet slammed to the floor. He whipped around upon the dignified attorney Pearsall.

"To hell with the Morganston jewelery and Henry Bolton's dumb play in letting the thieves get away and then lying about it!" he rapped out. "I'll step over state lines, national boundaries and on the necks of a few lawyers before I finish with this! I'm stopping the stealing from the food supply of the real people of this town if I have to go over there and punch some sense into the head of the governor himself!"

"That paper on your desk is a court injunction against anymore activity outside our city limits, Gordon!" came back Mayor Van Royston.

Wildcat picked up the official-looking document, tore it in two parts and tossed them in the general direction of Attorney Pearsall.

"Sergeant Thorsen!" directed Wildcat. "You will have fifty more men ready for truck detail in half an hour! In the meantime, you can clear my office of some of these nitwits! I'm still the commissioner of this department and the general in command! Now get out, all of you, before Sergeant Thorsen has you thrown out!"

"Yes, sir!" snapped the wooden-faced Sergeant Thorsen. "I will have the men ready, chief! You people will have to get out of our way!"

Deputy Henry Bolton reared to his long legs, his small mouth screwed up.

"But I'm acting commissioner! Mayor Van Royston, are you—"

"That for being so damn dumb!" rapped Wildcat, and swung a fist from his waist.

Before Deputy Bolton struck the floor on his back, Attorney Pearsall had gripped Mayor Van Royston's right arm. His voice was still dignified.

"We will leave now, mayor," he directed. "This is possibly the best thing that could have happened. We will be able to make a thorough job of cleaning out the department when court opens in the morning. Contempt of court will stop all of it."

Wildcat Gordon had stepped aside and was talking with Sergeant Thorsen. His broad back was turned upon his departing visitors.

"I may be gone for some time, Sergeant Thorsen," stated Wildcat. "You can now ignore that order to put more men across the line. I may have to work this out another way. No doubt, Henry Bolton will be in charge in the morning. Carry on, Sergeant Thorsen, but hold yourself prepared for word from me."

LESS than twenty minutes later, Wildcat Gordon stepped into the gloomy lower floor of a waterfront loft building. He walked directly to a small elevator that shot him upward. This loft building was the property of old Quick Trigger. Here Wildcat Gordon had resided for several years. When Quick Trigger had retired, he had put his savings into this building and the penthouse on its top.

Tiny Traeger, her grandfather and Wildcat Gordon made up all of the household. Quick Trigger looked upon Wildcat as he would have a son. Tiny secretly worshiped the hard-boiled Wildcat, but managed to conceal it very well, except from her shrewd old grandfather.

When Wildcat entered the penthouse, he went directly to the kitchen where the aroma of hot coffee was pleasant. Tiny was like a miniature woman. Black curls clustered around her small ears. There were dancing little devils in her blue eyes.

The dancing devils were in a snappish mood at this moment. The hour was long after midnight. Wildcat did not trouble to remove his army hat, and he erected his feet on one corner of the table.

"Humph!" sniffed Tiny, setting the coffeepot down hard and sweeping his feet to the floor. "Don't tell me this Jerry Connors let you come home? I expected you to be sending for your clothes!"

Wildcat's Texas eyes smiled across the table at Quick Trigger.

"All children should be put to bed early, Quick Trigger," he observed. "Have you looked up that finishing school I mentioned for your little grandchild?"

Quick Trigger grinned across a worried frown and rubbed a hand over his bald head. He peered at Tiny with what seemed to be nearsighted eyes, but which were remarkably keen.

"I suppose this Jerry Connors has been to a finishing school!" snapped Tiny. "That's probably where she was taught to go riding around at all hours of the night with a cop!"

"I think maybe I'd better go to bed," yawned Quick Trigger.

He never missed a chance to leave Wildcat and Tiny together. He hoped that someday Wildcat would discover Tiny was madly in love with him.

Then perhaps Wildcat would get over the idea she was still a child, and that he was too old and too hard-bitten for a girl who has grown up so fast he did not yet realize she was a woman.

"Wait, Quick Trigger," said Wildcat. "Forget Jerry Connors, Tiny. I only wish I knew what had become of her tonight. In the meantime, Tiny, I think you had better begin packing. I seem to feel we are going for a little visit over the state line."

Tiny's mood underwent an instant change. The little devils in her eyes danced and sparkled. She might be half pint in size, but when it came to action, the doll-like girl was a veteran copper in a sense.

WHEN Tiny went out, Wildcat sketched briefly all that had happened.

"It's only a matter of hours until they will be having me up for contempt of court," he stated. "Only I won't be here. What did you dig up, Quick Trigger?"

The older man shook his head, as if he wished he did not have to pass along his information. During the night hours, he had been puttering around in an unsavory neighborhood; just an old man who seemed to be drinking a little too much.

But old Quick Trigger knew the ins and outs of the underworld. His apparently nearsighted eyes took in everything, and his ears missed nothing.

"I reckon you're headed for trouble, Wildcat," he said. "You have got Dummy Blatz believing The Whisperer is trying to muscle in on his truck an food rackets. I heard some of the boys cussing about it, and saying Dummy Blatz was damn fool enough to be wanting The Whisperer in his own mob."

Wildcat's cold eyes glinted, and he nodded."

"I was hoping Dummy Blatz might get around to that idea, Quick Trigger. I suppose he thinks that would give him a control that the law couldn't break. Well, that's O.K. with me."

"Dang it all!" groaned Quick Trigger. "I wish I'd never made those fool dental plates! You're goin' to get yourself ousted as commissioner one of these days, Wildcat, and it'll be all my fault!"

"I'm already ousted," grinned Wildcat. "You say you heard some of the boys talking about a bigger boss than Dummy Blatz?"

Old Quick Trigger admitted he had heard something of that sort.

"I'm a little slow," he said, "but the way I figure it, Wildcat, Dummy Blatz is only working on the frontline for some big guy who is pulling the strings from right here in the city."

Again Wildcat nodded.

"That makes it perfect then," he said. "Evidently Dummy Blatz had some kind of protection lined up on his side of the state line. As long as the racket take is coming out of the city food supply, and the right money is being handed out, Sheriff Randolph and his crowd will keep hands off.

"But maybe I will go to work for Dummy Blatz, and just to make it strong, some of the stuff he has been hijacking is going to get too hot to handle, Quick Trigger."

"Listen, Wildcat, don't let's get ourselves in any deeper—"

Quick Trigger's protest was cut short by the sudden buzzing of the door button. Tiny's quick steps went along the hallway past the kitchen. Wildcat snapped to his feet as he heard Tiny let out a warning cry.

"No use, Gordon!" said a hard voice from the kitchen doorway. "We have our orders! The judge got an idea you might think of taking a run-out powder!"

The speaker had the marks of a court deputy all over him. His companion was holding a revolver casually in one hand. Apparently they knew better than to take any chances on Wildcat Gordon.

One deputy said, "I've got a contempt of court order! It's a warrant, so you'll come along, Gordon!"

CHAPTER VIII
TOO HOT TO HANDLE

"EXPECTED you fellows," said Wildcat Gordon, cheerfully. "You know I wouldn't try fighting a court warrant. I'm not crazy."

"No, not much!" rapped one of the deputies. "We happen to know you're not crazy enough to fight anything, Wildcat! So I'll be taking that gun of yours! Not that you'd use it, of course!"

Wildcat grinned cheerfully and permitted his police pistol to be collected. Then he said he would go along, but would the deputies mind him changing shirts?

"Don't like to say good morning to the judge this way," stated Wildcat. "Oh, you fellows can come right along to my room and watch me change. That'll be all right."

"It sure will!" rapped one deputy. "And the way everybody feels about it, I guess if we had to put you out cold nobody would be sore! You change that shirt, and we'll watch you! Quick Trigger here can stay right in the kitchen, and that little girl might as well stay with him!"

Wildcat whistled tunelessly and walked between the court deputies to his own room. The sudden swearing out of the warrant had taken him by surprise. He had expected Mayor Van Royston would wait until morning. But the mayor had the advice of Attorney Pearsall, and the lawyer was smart.

Wildcat realized that his arrest at this moment would upset all of his plans. A deposed police commissioner held for contempt of court would hardly be in position to act.

He walked across his room, with the deputies close beside him. One still held his gun handy. He would have used it, too, for Wildcat had a reputation that was not to be overlooked.

An indignant Tiny obeyed the deputies' order to go into the kitchen with her grandfather.

"Just when I was about to get in on something," she complained. "Does Wildcat always have to get himself into jams?"

"I'm afraid that's the way it will always be, Tiny," groaned Quick Trigger.

In his room, Wildcat walked to one side and threw open a door that led into a smaller dressing room. The deputies crowded suspiciously close, both standing in the doorway.

They looked relieved when they saw this smaller room had neither a door nor a window. Racks of clothing hung along the back wall. At one end was a shower bath, with the curtain drawn back. A mirror and a table completed the furnishings.

"Make it snappy, Gordon!" said one of the deputies. "And don't think I won't shoot if you try any funny stuff! You might be Commissioner Gordon, but to me you're just another sap that's in wrong with the court!"

Wildcat doffed his coat and pulled his shirt over his head. His lips still puckered in a tuneless whistle.

"Guess I might as well change my suit," he stated, dragging off his blue serge trousers. "A brown suit always looks better in court in the morning."

Clad only in his underwear and yellow shoes, Wildcat was a short but muscled figure that seemed to ripple with strength. Still in his underwear and sloes, he stepped among the clothes hanging on the racks, pushing them apart, apparently choices as to the suit he wanted.

The deputies never left their position in the doorway, and one gripped his revolver firmly. The clothes on the racks concealed the half-naked Wildcat, as he still whistled and made his selection.

THE clothes were moving when the tuneless whistle abruptly ceased. There was no other sound, not so much as a whisper. For perhaps the space of ten seconds, the deputies did not awaken to the true situation.

Then one man bellowed, "Gordon! What the hell you doing?"

He received no reply, and both men jumped across the narrow width of the dressing room. They ripped the clothing apart on the racks, pulling suits to the floor.

"Why the—" voiced one of the deputies, with an unprintable ending. "He couldn't have gotten out—" This fellow was staring at a blank, solid wall behind the racks of clothing. He started hammering on it with the butt of his gun, but it gave forth no hollow sound, as he might have expected. He started pulling up the rug and yelling.

The other deputy ran from the room and along the hallway to the kitchen. "Say, where the hell would—"

If he was expecting a reply from either Quick Trigger or Tiny, he was disappointed. The hot coffeepot still sat on the table. But there was no one in the kitchen. Inside of a minute, one deputy had gone through every room in the penthouse, and the other had pounded futilely all the way around the walls of the dressing room.

"Great smoke, Art! The damn fool couldn't have beat it without his clothes! Come on! We'll nail him down below! He can't go places naked like that!"

Five seconds later, the deputies were hammering at the door of an automatic elevator that had brought them to the penthouse, but now refused to respond to any of its buttons. Cursing wildly, the pair ran around, seeking a stairway leading down.

There was no stairway that they could discover. They dashed to the roof coping, staring at the street ten stories below.

AT this time, Wildcat Gordon had stepped from what apparently was a solid concrete column on the lower floor of Quick Trigger's loft building. Clad only in his underwear and shoes, he glided over to one of his small cars.

The concrete pillar had closed again. A one-man elevator that worked on a single silent steel piston had deposited Wildcat on the lower floor. He had walked directly into it through his rack of clothing.

If the pair of discomfited deputies had been given hours, they might have discovered the mere hairline which showed where the wall had opened to admit their prisoner. The operation of the elevator was as silent as the sliding of a rod in oil.

From the rumble seat of Wildcat's coupé came a complete outfit of clothing. He had whipped into his suit, and an army hat was over his head as Quick Trigger and Tiny came hurrying from the regular house elevator.

Old Quick Trigger, chuckling, said, "Well, that worked, and I put our elevator out of business."

"Yes," stated Tiny, with a little smile, "and I snipped off the telephone wires, so we're having house guests until they get help some other way."

Wildcat grinned and shot the coupé into the street. He headed directly across town, going in the direction of the river and the state line.

"Quick Trigger and I have a little business, Tiny," he said. "And when it's over, you'll be going on a nice, little camping trip."

"Camping trip?" flared Tiny. "I'll do no such thing! I'm going with you!"

But Tiny did not go with Wildcat and Quick Trigger, and she was to go on a camping trip in a very few hours. For Wildcat Gordon had thought out one of the most daring plans ever to be undertaken by The Whisperer.

WILDCAT GORDON had said some of the trucks over the state line might become too hot for Dummy Blatz to handle.

It was now the night following the murder of Detective Jim Mulcahey. The rain that had slashed the six-lane highway had been continuous for more than forty-eight hours. Though it was nearly midnight, the road roared with the passage of the big trucks.

Passenger traffic had thinned out. The overnight red-balls from the country districts into the big town thundered and rumbled up and down the many grades. On the broad seat in the cab of a big single truck without a trailer was a driver who appeared to be a veteran at the wheel.

The man's face was obscured by a gray beard. A tight old cap was pulled over eyes that seemed to be sunken and nearsighted. The big truck topped a hill; the gears whined and it started down at an increased speed.

A passenger bus, bound in the other direction, skidded in the nearby lane and the old man driving the truck was forced to twist the wheel suddenly to miss a collision.

"I don't like this job, Wildcat," he grunted. "Give me one of my old guns and a mob in an alley any time. I feel like a target sitting up here."

The Whisperer was the other man on the truck seat. His gray-clad form was only a blur through the rain-slashed cab window.

"If I've judged it right, you won't be a target this time, Quick Trigger," assured The Whisperer. "Dummy Blatz won't have this truck wrecked. I checked and loaded only with stuff they need on their mob-controlled markets in the city. I've made a poor guess if the load isn't hijacked within the next five miles."

"If anything happens to us, I hope Tiny goes home," said old Quick Trigger.

"Nothing will happen to us this time," assured

The Whisperer. "But this load will not reach the state line on this truck."

The Whisperer's belief was confirmed by four hard-eyed men crowding the seat of an empty freighter. This second truck was perhaps a quarter of a mile behind the red-ball driven by Quick Trigger. It had been maintaining that distance for some ten miles.

One man said, "Well, them eggs will be a pick-up for Dummy. It's a break that I spotted that new driver for the Brunn & Brunn outfit. The boss ain't put the bug on them yet."

The speaker was referring to Brunn & Brunn, a trucking firm down in the city that had been one of the few to fight the racket of Dummy Blatz. As a result, loads were snatched from the Brunn & Brunn trucks whenever possible.

"That new driver's an old-timer," said another man in the pursuing truck. "He won't last long."

"You can lay off that idea on this job," said the first man. "Dummy needs that load for his own city market, so there won't be any rough stuff. We give them the run, transfer the load and beat it. We don't want any dead men lying around to spot the transfer."

"Dummy's town market is doing a big business," said another fellow. "The top boss in the city sure knows his way around when it comes to having Wildcat Gordon's cops chasing their own tails."

His words indicated, as The Whisperer already had come to believe, that Dummy Blatz was only the front man for the racket on this side of the state line. The big boss was someone in the city who "knew his way around."

"The second side road this side of the line is the spot," stated one of the men. "Tiger's down there with the light."

At this, the driver of the empty truck stepped on the gas. The empty truck picked up speed.

"They've got an extra ridin' with their driver," said the pilot. "Maybe it's another one of Wildcat Gordon's dicks?"

"Not any more!" said another man harshly. "They've been pulled off, and I hear Wildcat Gordon himself is in some hot spot!"

Dummy Blatz's thugs seemed well informed on the business of the city police. In their operation over the state line in Sheriff Randolph's county, there was a notable absence of highway patrolmen at spots where trouble was likely to break. This might have been coincidence, and it might have been something else.

IN the big red-ball truck ahead, The Whisperer pinched Quick Trigger's right arm. The truck had topped a hill and dropped down a grade. Now it was starting up another heavy hill and Quick Trigger had pushed the gears into second. The freighter slowed, grinding upward at slow speed.

"There's the showdown, Quick Trigger," came from The Whisperer. "Remember, when we're flagged, you swing the truck as if you had no suspicion of trouble. But as soon as we're off the main highway, we take a run-out."

There was no other motor car on the grade at this moment. A man had stepped into the highway waving a red lantern. He was opposite the smooth turn-off into a side road.

"Hey, you fellas!" he yelled. "Smash-up's blocked the road ahead! You'll have to detour here! You can swing back a mile or so up and catch the highway!"

Quick Trigger swore loudly, as any truck driver would, but he obeyed the detour command. The red-ball truck ground its way off the main concrete and started along the narrow side road.

Almost immediately, the lights of another truck spotted the red-baller from behind. The Dummy Blatz transfer hijackers were moving up fast.

"Let 'er roll, Quick Trigger!" directed The Whisperer. "Here's where we get off!"

Quick Trigger locked the brakes. The Whisperer and the ex-deputy hit the road together. They started running up the side hill into the rainy darkness.

"That's leaving the rats a perfectly good load of eggs!" growled Quick Trigger. "I don't see yet what's your idea, Wildcat!"

"Nothing much, except to donate Dummy Blatz a load of eggs he needs down below," came The Whisperer's chuckling voice. "I made sure he wouldn't run one of the Brunn & Brunn trucks over the line, and his mugs may break a few eggs making the transfer."

The empty truck squealed to a stop behind the loaded red-baller.

"Smart guys!" rapped one of the mobsters. "I guess they've been told what's healthy when it comes to a detour up here!"

"Sure!" snarled another man. "Well, let 'em scram! Come on, swing around and put their tails together! We'll make a fast job of this one!"

The empty truck swung in the side road. Out on the highway, the "detour man" was no longer waving his red lantern. He was coming along to join his companions.

The Whisperer and Quick Trigger were only fifty yards or so up the hill when the older man halted. The Whisperer caught his arm.

"I think we'll watch this from a place higher up," he advised.

Down below, two men with light machine guns were on the road. They made a quick survey of the hill and decided the driver and the other man had made good their getaway.

"Swing 'em, boys!" said one of the men.

Four men started transferring the cases as one man stood guard.

"Top load!" exulted one of the mobsters. "Dummy will like this one!"

The egg crates from the back of the truck had been transferred. Two men were in the red-ball truck, shoving the light cases back. Out on the main highway, the night traffic was sending up its rushing rumble of low gears on the grade.

One man picked up an egg crate, passed it along. The next man reached for it, then he dropped back as if he had been stung. His hands seemed to try to push the egg case away from him.

"Look out, Jake! It's smokin'!"

HIS sudden yell brought the faces of the other mobsters around. Perhaps all had time to see the mushing out of the gray smoke as the egg crate was lifted, then dropped to the floor of the truck. But if the three nearest men did see that smoke, they would never speak of it.

The gray smoke flashed into spreading blue flame, which was instantly followed by the appalling blast of an explosion that split the heavy sides of the big red-ball truck wide open. The terrific detonation rocked the hillside. The empty truck turned on its nose and rolled from the road into the rocks.

Where the red-ball load of eggs had stood was only a momentary pall of thick, gray smoke. Grinding echoes ran along the hill.

One man of the five had seen the smoke or heard the warning shout in time. He was running madly away when the blast hurled him to his knees. He scrambled to his feet and started again.

The rumble of the blast died in his ears. But it was succeeded by a chilling whisper borne down upon him by the rain. An eerie, sinister voice that could be distinctly heard.

"Stand where you are! Tell Dummy Blatz The Whisperer is taking over the truck racket! Those who interfere will die!"

The shaking mobster did not stand where he was. He ran as he had never run before. He knew the mutilated bodies of four men were back in the wreckage.

A chuckling, ghostly whisper followed him on the rain.

CHAPTER IX
CAMPERS IN THE NIGHT

MAYOR VAN ROYSTON was pacing up and down the office of the police commissioner. Deputy Henry Bolton had been listening for half an hour to a tirade of complaint.

"It depends upon recovering the Morganston jewels whether you become commissioner, Henry," stated the mayor. "Wildcat Gordon has defied the court and disappeared. You tell me none of your men have been able to get a line on the stolen stuff?"

"They've followed up all of the routine," said Deputy Bolton. "We've rounded up a hundred suspects and we're watching all of the fences."

"Routine! Routine!" shouted Mayor Van Royston. "You'll have to do something more than follow routine!"

Mayor Van Royston seemed to forget that one of his chief objections to Wildcat Gordon was his consistent failure to follow routine.

Detective Sergeant Thorsen sat quietly at his desk, his wooden features undisturbed by the controversy. Sergeant Thorsen had had a message from Wildcat Gordon. He might have furnished some information as to the absent commissioner's whereabouts, but he did not.

Attorney Pearsall came in with his usual quiet dignity.

"You haven't anything on the Morganston stuff," he stated. "You don't need to tell me. And you've heard the new report: four men were blown to eternity over the state line last night. Someone told the county patrolmen over there they heard the notorious Whisperer just after the explosion. What do you know about it?"

"I'll have nothing to do with anything over the state line," said Mayor Van Royston. "Deputy Bolton has checked with Brunn & Brunn, owners of the

blasted truck. Their office asserts they had no load of eggs on the road and that the wrecked truck was apparently stolen from its garage."

Detective Sergeant Thorsen rarely volunteered a speech.

"Too bad Dummy Blatz himself wasn't helping hijack that load of eggs," he suddenly drawled. "Dummy and his mob have always been great boys on eggs, especially the kind that busted in the face of his mob last night."

"Eggs! The Whisperer! The Morganston emeralds and diamonds!" Mayor Van Royston did some exploding on his own account.

"We try to rid the department of Wildcat Gordon, and now we're in a jam that may cause all of us to be cleaned out! Attorney Pearsall, we have been trying for months to get this killer, The Whisperer! If he starts a war over the state line with Dummy Blatz, I don't see what we can do about it!"

"You're right," replied Attorney Pearsall. "Keep your police in their own jurisdiction. They had better devote their efforts to finding the Morganston stuff. This business has finished Wildcat Gordon, but it will be all the reform party can do to prevent it from shaking up the whole department."

AT the time Mayor Van Royston and his temporary acting commissioner, Henry Bolton, were finding themselves in what undoubtedly would develop into a bad political tangle, Dummy Blatz had received the latest report of The Whisperer. He was at his stronghold estate on the river, across from the city which he apparently never entered.

Dummy sent for Joe Koroni. The flat-faced mobster's light eyes held a questioning glint as he heard the voice of a girl as Koroni entered.

"Kind of fallen for the redheaded dame, huh?" questioned Dummy. "You think maybe we could use her to trick this Jerry Connors? I want Jerry Connors!"

Joe Koroni's dark face wore a self-satisfied smirk.

"The redhead's on the square, chief," he grunted. "An' I'll have her eatin' outta my hand. Give me time."

"Yeah, Joe? You've been a fall guy before. Be sure you don't get your hand bitten. But that ain't why I wanted you. Joe, you and the boys have got to find The Whisperer. This last play of his shows he means business, and I think he wants to play ball with us."

Joe Koroni shook his head. His scowl indicated he was not enthusiastic about finding The Whisperer.

"What's the big shot across the river say about your idea of taking The Whisperer in on the racket, chief?"

"That's why I sent for you, Joe. The big boss says we've got to have him in, or rub him out. He

would prefer to have him in. There are some things he believes The Whisperer could handle over in the big town."

"O.K., chief. We'll find The Whisperer."

Joe Koroni went back to the redheaded girl he had said he would have eating out of his hand, give him time. Pretty Jerry Connors was in an adjoining room.

As Koroni came in, he said, "The chief's passed me a big job, kid. I'm going to get The Whisperer."

The girl's brown eyes lighted. She looked at the dark-faced mobster and wrinkled her freckled nose.

"Yeah? It hasn't taken me long to find out that Dummy Blatz passes all the dirty work along to you, Joe. I might like you a lot better if you had a little more spunk. What does Dummy ever do except have you do his stuff?"

Jerry Connors pulled away when Joe Koroni came closer. The mobster's dark eyes glistened. The redheaded girl had been wisely planting a seed of grandeur in his brain.

"That's right," he muttered. "Dummy talks, and I do his stuff. Maybe, kid, it won't always be that way."

Jerry Connors did not know the lucky break she had been given. For some time past, Joe Koroni had been thinking along this same line. Especially since The Whisperer had started muscling in on their game, several of the mob were becoming dissatisfied.

Joe Koroni was coming to that place where the first lieutenant of a mobleader always arrives sooner of later: He was thinking all the big rake-off going to Dummy Blatz could just as well be split another way.

But first, he would have to establish direct contact with the big boss across the river. Up to this time, none but Dummy Blatz himself knew who pulled the political strings in two states, bossed the multiple rackets, collected the major share of the illicit money.

The fiery Jerry Connors was playing a dangerous game. Thus far, she had held her own, standing off all advances from Joe Koroni, but plainly hinting everything might be different if Korori came to be something more than a mere tool of Dummy Blatz.

THE order to Joe Koroni came from Dummy Blatz the night after the egg truck explosion had wiped out four of Dummy's mob. For three days now, it had been raining steadily. The Dummy Blatz estate was located on River Road; one little traveled, and tonight a muddied flood of water from the driving downpour.

The big house fronted on the river setting back from an expanse of sloping green lawn which was neither walled nor fenced. For his own satisfaction, though he felt he did not really need them over here,

Dummy Blatz had two armed guards stationed in a little house at the motor driveway entrance.

Tonight, the two guards were playing a game of rummy, and drinking. The rain kept them inside, and there was no traffic moving to engage their interest.

"This is a helluva job," grunted one of the guards. "I don't see why the chief don't pull us off. I hear they've got Wildcat Gordon off the job across the river, and there ain't anyone else likely to come horning in."

The other guard took a long drink and growled an agreement.

They might not have been so sure of their belief if they could have been outside in the drizzling downpour. A gray-clad figure was hardly to be distinguished from the river mist and the rain, as it moved noiselessly up from the shore.

The Whisperer had emerged from a long, low-cabined speedboat that had drifted down the stream with its engine silenced. The boat ran into the muddy bank, was secured bow and stern, and The Whisperer headed across River Road.

The gray-clad man glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. The hands indicated a few minutes before ten o'clock. He waited for only a minute or two, then he heard the rattling cough of an ancient motor from up on River Road.

At this, The Whisperer faded swiftly into the trees at the edge of Dummy Blatz's estate, moving toward the lighted house.

The old car that came soggily along River Road was driven by a very old man with a flowing white beard. Beside him huddled the slight figure of a girl, whose face showed pale in the rain.

The chugging engine of the old car sputtered now and then. It missed, picked up, missed again. A cart trailer piled high with soaking camp equipment bounced along behind. The miserable outfit neared the little house where the two guards of Dummy Blatz were moaning about their hard luck.

"Dang the danged rain!" complained the old man, in a high, querulous voice. "I tell yuh, Mary, this here engine's goin' to quit cold! I'm goin' to make camp 'fore we git ourselves drowned!" The girl's voice was shrill and carrying.

"Now, grandpa, you've been saying that for ten miles! You can't camp until we come to some place they'd let us!"

"Some place they'd let us!" howled the old man wrathfully. "I've been lookin' for some such place all night! Dangitall! She's quittin' on us, Mary!" The wheezy motor indeed seemed to be about to give up the ghost. The old car backfired with snapping explosions.

"But you can't do it, grandpa! They'd have us arrested!"

The girl was forced to scream out the words to make herself heard. The speech of both the old man and his companion carried to the guards inside the gateway house.

"Now what the hell an' all?" grunted one, and they snapped the door open.

AT that instant, the old man turned the ancient car from the sloshing road directly onto the smooth, sloping lawn of Dummy Blatz.

"Grandpa! It's a private place!" the girl shrilled.

"Shut up, Mary! Dang the danged rain, anyway! We're settin' up camp right here! There ain't nobody makin' me move another foot!"

The old motor gave one expiring explosion as the two guards came slapping over the wet lawn. The bearded man rolled from the seat and walked around, starting to pull at the canvas on the trailer.

"Hey, you!" barked one of the guards. "You can't be runnin' that wreck up here! This is private property!"

"Heh?" yelled the old man, cupping one ear. "There ain't nobody makin' me move, because that danged engine's quit! Think I'm gonna to be drowned like a rat? Mary! You help with this here tent!"

"Grandpa! Come on!"

The girl shrilled at the old man and stepped on the old car's starter. There was a hopeless grinding, without result.

"You gotta get that car outta here!" The guard was emphatic and he was carrying a short shotgun in his hands. But he was looking at the old man and the girl, and he was not quite clear just how he would make them move.

His partner said, "They've gotta get out, but you can't get tough with the girl and an old guy like him."

"Get tough, heh?" squawked the old man, dropping the canvas and squaring off with feeble belligerence. "Mary, yuh hear that? He wants to git tough with your grandpa!"

"Please, grandpa!" the girl pleaded, getting down into the wet grass and catching hold of one arm. "You'll get us into trouble!"

But grandpa muttered, "Trouble or no trouble, I'm campin' out right here till morning!"

A rolled tent plopped from the trailer. The old man started pulling it around, fastening a corner to the stranded car.

One of the guards growled, "Jack, you'll have to go get Dummy himself. If they can't start the car, they can't. We don't want to be gettin' in a jam with folks like them."

Grandpa went right ahead with setting up his tent, and the girl continued unavailing efforts to get the stalled motor going.

The tent was nearly up when Dummy Blatz followed one of the guards from the house, the rain glistening on his raincoat. The mobster's flat face was heavy with suspicion, but when his pale eyes took in the white-bearded old man and the doll-like figure of the girl, a hard grin replaced his doubt.

"I told 'em they'd have to get off, but I guess their engine's conked out, chief," said one guard.

Dummy Blatz caught a glimpse of a pretty oval face with blue eyes that showed startlingly in the flashlight he had brought along. Dummy was not the "fall guy for dames" he knew Joe Koroni to be, but this miniature woman with the blue eyes and the black curls shining in the rain was different.

The old man was still fumbling around with the canvas tent. The whole affair pulled loose at one corner and collapsed. "Dang it, Mary!" he howled. "I guess maybe we'll just hafta bunk under the car like we done last night!" Dummy Blatz let out a hard laugh.

"Hell, grandpa!" he exclaimed. "I guess we ain't that tough around here. If you can't move the car, I won't see an old fellow like you an' a nice little girl sleepin' out in the rain. You come along to the house, and I'll find a place for you to bunk!"

AT about the same time, the gray figure of The Whisperer had reached a projecting ledge outside a brilliantly lighted window in the second story of the Dummy Blatz house. His strong fingers with their square ends were twisted around light iron bars which blocked reaching the inner frame.

The bars bent slowly under the steel-like strength of the two hands. The Whisperer was looking into a room that no doubt Dummy Blatz

used as his office. A square desk sat in the middle of the room, and a huge safe occupied one corner.

The Whisperer emitted a ghostly chuckle. The door of the safe had been left standing open. Dummy Blatz possibly had been called out at a moment when he was examining some papers in the safe. Two books, which looked as if they might have contained records, lay open on the big desk.

The iron bars yielded and The Whisperer was slipping between them, reaching toward the edge of the window frame. He withdrew swiftly. Two persons had opened a door and come into Dummy Blatz's office.

"Hellamighty!" said The Whisperer. "I might have known it!"

He was looking at the redheaded Jerry Connors. The girl was close beside the dark-faced Joe Koroni. The Whisperer could read their lips as they spoke.

"First, Joe, you've got to find out the name of the real boss," said the redheaded girl.

"I ain't takin' any chances on wearin' lilies," muttered Joe Koroni. "You watch that door. Dummy'll be coming back any minute."

The Whisperer's breath whistled with satisfaction and admiration for the brown-eyed Jerry Connors. What a girl!

CHAPTER X
THE MURDER OF WILDCAT

REDHEADED Jerry Connors slipped to another door, opened it slightly and stood there. Joe Koroni crossed to Dummy Blatz's desk and started shuffling the pages of the two record books. He grunted an oath and pulled out a desk drawer.

"If I can't tie up with the big boss himself, kid, how am I goin' to let him know what's what?" he growled.

"If you don't find it," said Jerry Connors brightly, "maybe I could play Dummy for what he knows."

"Yeah?" snapped Joe Koroni. "I'll find it, and you'll stay square with me or—"

The Whisperer let go of the iron bars and dropped lightly from the broad ledge under the window. He had heard all that he needed to know. He had formulated a daring plan of his own, and the amazing game the wise Jerry Connors was playing fitted with it perfectly.

The Whisperer crouched at the corner of the house where light streamed from the opened front door. He saw the figures of the two guards go back toward their little house at the driveway entrance.

"Sure, why didn't you drive right up to the door, grandpa?" came Dummy Blatz's voice. "What you need is a couple of stiff drinks! Maybe Mary could stand one herself!"

The old, white-bearded man was shuffling along

beside Dummy Blatz. The girl said, "Grandpa, I don't think we ought to be imposing on folks!"

"Shucks, Mary, I knowed nobody'd chase us off on a night like this!" said the old man. "Dang it all! My watch went an' come off the chain!"

The bent old man stooped down, fumbling around. The Whisperer crept slowly along the wall of the house. Dummy Blatz swore and flicked on his flashlight, running it over the ground. He lowered his head, his pale eyes searching for the watch the old man said he had dropped.

THE old man looked very feeble, but there was nothing feeble about the battering ram of a fist that suddenly smashed into the lowered chin of Dummy Blatz.

Before the staggered, surprised mobster could let out a yell, the old man's other hand came around with a swishing blow.

This time "grandpa" was not depending upon his bony knuckles. A blackjack had slipped from his sleeve. It cracked over one of the mobster's ears and dropped him cold in the driveway.

In the shadow of the house, The Whisperer had been making a quick transformation. The dental plates had come from his mouth. The round-brimmed hat flattened and disappeared into his clothes. A hand moved zippers, changing the gray suit turned to a violent shade of brown.

Yellow shoes appeared as other zippers were pulled. With an army hat jammed down over one eye, Wildcat Gordon had come back.

Wildcat sprang toward the group in the driveway. He returned a silenced pistol to his pocket. The two guards had gone into the shelter of their driveway house. What was there to fear from an old, doddering man and a pretty girl?

One guard said, "Dummy's got ideas about that kid. He'll get the old fellow drunk and then—"

If Dummy Blatz had any such idea, it was now forgotten.

Wildcat said, "Good work, Quick Trigger! I'll take him! Back this way along the house! I happen to know they won't come looking for him from the inside for a few minutes!"

Tiny Traeger pressed a small hand on one of Wildcat's arms as he swung the bulky figure of Dummy Blatz over a shoulder.

"I haven't had so much fun since I played I was a gangster's moll," said Tiny.

"Shut up!" growled Wildcat. "You talk too much!"

"Yes?" snapped Tiny. "I suppose if it was Jerry Connors—"

"Jerry Connors is some girl!" rapped Wildcat. "Quick Trigger, Jerry couldn't be doing better if she knew the whole game!"

"You're going through with it, Wildcat?" said

old Quick Trigger. "If we fail, it's the finish."

"We won't fail!" promised Wildcat grimly, sloshing across the flooded River Road toward the river.

The weight of the unconscious Dummy Blatz lay across the commissioner's shoulder, as he slid down the river bank to the darkened speedboat. Wildcat carried the mobster into the cabin and laid him on the floor. He snapped handcuffs around Dummy's wrists, then had a quick thought.

Wildcat pulled the mobster's arms around an iron stanchion and clicked the handcuffs again. When he recovered his senses, Dummy would find himself firmly locked in place.

Before he started the motor, Wildcat went to the small outside deck and looked out across the stormy river. There was nearly a mile to be crossed to the waterfront of the city. The state line marked the middle of the wide stream.

Wildcat produced a flashlight and flicked it on and off three times. There was no light on the shadowy craft lying perhaps a hundred yards offshore. But a pinpoint of illumination leaped three times in reply to the signal.

Wildcat then went about the getaway in a strange fashion. Having got Dummy Blatz aboard the speedboat without raising an alarm, he now opened the cut-out on the powerful high-speed motor.

The river resounded with crackling explosions that must have struck with startling effect upon those members of Dummy's mob who might be around his stronghold.

The two guards in the little house could not miss hearing the staccato, much like a suddenly released machine gun. Wildcat's broad mouth wore a tight grin.

"I imagine Joe Koroni and Jerry Connors will move fast, when they hear that," he murmured. "All right, Quick Trigger, cast off!"

As the speedboat glided from the shore, Wildcat went into the cabin and flashed on a light. He slapped cold water over Dummy's face and hit him sharply with one flat hand.

DUMMY BLATZ opened his eyes and blinked. His pale orbs showed the first hint of fear when he saw the square countenance of Wildcat Gordon. It was evident he could not quickly assimilate the facts of his position. He started to rise, but found himself secured to the iron stanchion.

"Wildcat Gordon?" he grunted. "What the—"

"Too bad, Dummy," interrupted Wildcat. "Been wanting to have a little talk with you down at headquarters for a long time. The trouble was, you wouldn't come over in our yard. Now you're waiving extradition, and I won't have to bother your friendly governor."

Dummy's pale eyes turned to white ice.

"That old man—the girl—" Dummy was staring at the vivid face of Tiny Traeger. "Why, you—"

The name he might have called her was smashed back into his thick lips with the back of Wildcat's hand.

"Cut it, Dummy! This is my party, and your little ride! You'll be a long time coming back!"

Dummy Blatz gathered some of his shaken nerve.

"Yeah?" he blustered. "Well, you can't get away

with it! I've got contacts, see! You won't keep me locked up ten minutes!"

"That's right, Dummy," promised Wildcat calmly. "I'm not having you locked up. Where you're going there will be no shyster lawyers chasing in with court writs. You see, I'm in a jam myself over some court papers, so we'll try another kind of game. You and I are staying out in the country, Dummy, until you do some talking." The fear that then came into Dummy's eyes was stark, naked. He was recalling murdered Jim Mulcahey, and others.

His mind was jumping to some of the reports he had heard of Wildcat Gordon's methods.

Here was a police commissioner without even respect for the courts. Dummy Blatz must have been thinking, "Wildcat Gordon has no scruples, no more than any of my own mob; than myself."

This did not promise a cheerful finish to the little ride. The speedboat was humming toward the

middle of the river. It would be no time at all until it would be across the state line—that line which Dummy Blatz had not crossed for months, except in secret.

And Wildcat Gordon was not taking him to headquarters!

Dummy Blatz shivered. Wildcat grinned at him, went to the door of the cabin and called, "Quick

Trigger, you keep an eye on this mug! Take the wheel! I've got a landing of my own all picked out!"

Old Quick Trigger squeezed past Wildcat in the doorway. As he did, he muttered, as if to prevent Dummy Blatz hearing it, "There's a boat coming up, Wildcat. I'm not sure yet, but I think they're trailing us."

"I'll look out for it," growled Wildcat.

Dummy Blatz heard. His pale eyes rolled with a glint of hope. Wildcat stuck his rusty head back into the cabin doorway. He had a pistol in his palm. "Don't worry, Dummy," he stated quietly. "If any friends of yours happen along, all they'll find will be your rotten carcass handcuffed to that post." The fear came back into Dummy's face. Quick Trigger had pulled off his long, white beard. He sat down wearily, and said, "Nice night for campin' out, Dummy."

Wildcat was invisible on the outside deck. He suddenly closed the cut-out of their motor. The engine purred along. Above its throbbing came the sharper beat of another speedy motor. It sounded as if the other boat was fast drawing close.

Wildcat called, "Snap off that cabin light, Quick Trigger!"

DUMMY BLATZ groaned as the small interior was plunged into darkness. He could hear that other boat coming. Wildcat Gordon had convinced him he would do just as he promised. Only his corpse would be found handcuffed to the stanchion if that happened to be some of his boys.

Maybe Joe Koroni was trying to rescue him. If he could only stop him.

Dummy let out a sudden, wild yell that could have been heard for a long way in the rain. From the deck came Wildcat's voice.

"Just for that, Dummy, I'm going to give it to you now!"

"No! No! Gordon, no!"

Dummy shouted the words in a panic. Then the length of the speedboat jarred in a collision. There was the rough jolt of another boat striking.

Wildcat's voice outside shouted, "Damn you! Keep off, or I'll let you have it!"

The reply to that was a thudding, crackling shot. Then another. The gun was not in the hands of Wildcat Gordon. Dummy Blatz was sure of that. He had his first gleam of hope. For Wildcat Gordon had exploded an oath of pain which changed quickly to a gurgling groan.

Dummy Blatz heard a body thump to the deck outside. The motor of the speedboat was suddenly silenced. It seemed as if the other boat must have drifted away. Dummy felt a gun's muzzle thrust into his neck.

Quick Trigger said, "Keep quiet!" Then it came. A chilling, awesome whisper, borne out of the

night into the cabin.

"At last, Wildcat Gordon! I've waited a long time for this minute! You'll be a long time gone!"

"The Whisperer!" choked out Dummy Blatz.

Old Quick Trigger jerked the gun away from Dummy's throat, jumped to the cabin doorway. There was a sound of a body being dragged. A thumping splash came from the river. It was followed instantly by a weird, fiendish hiss, like the laughter of the damned.

Tiny Traeger cried out, "Wildcat! Oh, Wildcat!" The girl sprang across the cabin in the darkness. One of Quick Trigger's arms swept her to the floor.

"Lie down, you fool!" he commanded hoarsely.

At the same instant, the gun in his other hand erupted. It seemed to Dummy Blatz the old man had missed in the darkness. The speedboat was drifting in the current, waves slapping its sides. Suddenly, Quick Trigger let out a groaning oath. He was being pulled forcibly to the outside deck.

Dummy Blatz heard the thudding sound of a blow, another thumping splash in the river. Then old Quick Trigger's faint cry came on the rainy wind and that was all.

Tiny Traeger screamed.

"Dunk! Dunk! You don't know what you're doing!"

Dummy Blatz had no means of knowing what she meant by that. He could not know that Tiny Traeger only knew The Whisperer as a little, gray man called "Dunk" Smith. She believed him to be a friend of Wildcat Gordon and her grandfather.

Tiny at this instant believed some frightful mistake had been made. Surely those sounds could not have meant what they seemed.

"Dunk! Dunk!" she screamed again, rushing to the cabin doorway.

Possibly Dummy Blatz thought the girl had gone insane. The next instant, her cries ceased. The weird whisper came again. It was a hissing without words.

The third thumping splash came from the river. The shrill, terrified voice of Tiny Traeger rang out; then there was silence.

Dummy Blatz had plotted some cold-blooded killings in his time. But his bones were now chilled to their very marrows. This was the most ruthless murder he had ever witnessed, or believed he had.

The Whisperer had come! That lone, killing fiend! The monster that even some mobsters believe to be supernatural! Why had he come here on the river? Was he, Dummy Blatz, to be next?

Dummy cried out hoarsely, "Down here, Whisperer, if that's who you are! In here, Whisperer! I need you! I've been hoping I'd meet you, so that we could fix things up!"

THERE was a terrible, ghastly silence for the space of a full minute. Dummy listened to the gurgling slap of the waves. Was The Whisperer already in the cabin? Had he come to kill, to wipe out the leader of the rackets over the state line?

Then a light flicked on and beat like a whip across Dummy's pale eyes. The mobster licked his lips and stared.

"You—you couldn't be The Whisperer?"

Dummy was looking at a little, gray-clad man whose oddly pointed chin and long upper lip gave his face a queer, dead appearance. Yet all other features, the whitish blur of hair under a round-brimmed, solemn-looking hat, the small size of the man, the lack of expression in his colorless eyes—all seemed to dispute the fact that this man could be the notorious scourge of the underworld.

"I am The Whisperer," spoke a low, husky voice, as if the man lacked the proper vocal cords. "I had a score to settle with Wildcat Gordon, so I came when I saw him take you to the river."

Dummy Blatz swallowed hard. The Whisperer was holding a black automatic pistol in one hand. In the other was a new army hat with a drooping brim and a crushed peak.

The Whisperer's hand caressed the hat as if it were some symbol he had wanted. Dummy saw two bullet holes, the blots of new blood staining the hat around each one. Both were directly through the sweatband of Wildcat Gordon's army hat!

CHAPTER XI
JOE KORONI'S HATE

DUMMY BLATZ shivered when The Whisperer emitted a ghostly chuckle that apparently was his manner of laughing. The nerves of the mobster had been sorely tested.

The Whisperer stepped to the window and tossed Wildcat Gordon's bloody hat into the darkness.

"A nice souvenir, but dangerous," he stated. "I've a little trick here that will get the bracelets off your wrists, but first we'll have a little talk."

At the moment The Whisperer and Dummy Blatz were having their little talk, a police launch with three picked men and Sergeant Thorsen in command fell away from The Whisperer's drifting speedboat. Sergeant Thorsen wore the hint of a grin on his square, wooden face, as he looked at the pair of passengers he had just picked up.

Old Quick Trigger said, "I reckon if you've got a little medicine aboard, it won't do me or the girl any harm."

The former deputy rubbed his gray-stubbled chin and tried to shake some warmth into his soaked body. Tiny Traeger was sitting in back of the hot motor in the launch, her blue eyes wide and staring.

Sergeant Thorsen produced a flask of "medicine," and Quick Trigger got the brandy into his system.

"Wildcat plays a bit rough," suggested Sergeant Thorsen. "I'll bet if I hadn't been there with the boat, he'd have thrown both of you off, anyway."

Old Quick Trigger grinned. Tiny's mouth flopped open.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he would have," said Quick Trigger. "But you're to keep right on going, Sergeant Thorsen. You know when your boat hit us, it was supposed to be someone else."

"I know," said Sergeant Thorsen, "but I've got one more little assignment: I'm supposed to have pretty fair proof that Wildcat has been rubbed out."

Tiny let out a little scream, clamping a hand over her curving mouth, Then she said "He was murdered! I know it! I tried to get to him! You must pick him up if he's still in the river! That terrible Whisperer was there, and that Dunk Smith! I don't understand!"

Quick Trigger comforted the girl quickly.

"Don't you worry too much about Wildcat, honey. Yes, The Whisperer was there, and Dunk Smith."

These were two personalities to Tiny Traeger. The girl who was in love with Wildcat Gordon had not learned he was also The Whisperer and Dunk Smith.

The police launch was in the darkness. A hand flashed into the lighted cabin window of the speedboat nearby. Half a minute later, one of the men with Sergeant Thorsen fished a soaking hat from the river.

Sergeant Thorsen saw the bullet holes in the sweatband. He concealed it quickly, so that Tiny Traeger did not see. Within an hour, Sergeant Thorsen was to report at headquarters the probable death of Wildcat Gordon.

Sergeant Thorsen was on the river on the strength of a story he had told Deputy Henry Bolton about suspecting a waterfront gang having something to do with the theft of the Morganston jewels. He really was there because of a message from Wildcat Gordon, which had taken the police launch across the river to the estate of Dummy Blatz.

IN the rainy darkness, still without lights, Sergeant Thorsen shot his launch toward the city. If he had waited less than two minutes, he would possibly have taken other action—action that would have upset the whole complicated plan of The Whisperer.

For a long, low black boat was shooting across the river. As the police launch was swallowed up in the direction of the city, a searchlight sliced across the black, hissing water.

The Whisperer was saying to Dummy Blatz,

"That's my lineup, Dummy. You are collecting from eighteen trucking firms on the one highway. The nineteenth firm has held out on you and you have been hijacking their trucks. You are bossing the produce markets in half of the city. Have I checked?"

Dummy Blatz, still handcuffed to the stanchion, said, "You've checked. It's a sweet take, maybe half a million a month."

"All right," said The Whisperer calmly. "It might be a good idea for me to scuttle this speedboat and leave you where you are. I'm ready to take over, Dummy, and I'm not asking to come in, understand?"

The racketeer's pale eyes were bloodshot. He was convinced The Whisperer meant exactly what he said.

"But you'd have to build up your own mob, Whisperer, and I've got a political angle on both sides you can't take over," he said. "Maybe I'm not the big boss of all this."

"That makes no difference," said The Whisperer. "When I take over, I take it. I'll have the politicians lined up fast enough. I know all the answers. But I'd prefer to play along, Dummy, and use your mob. Am I in?"

"You're in, all the way," consented Dummy Blatz.

The Whisperer's strong hands caught the thug's handcuffs. One thumb separated a trick link. It seemed as if the Whisperer had broken the steel chain, and Dummy Blatz gasped.

At that instant, a beam of light shot across the bow of the speedboat. Before The Whisperer could turn, the side of another craft grated against the boat. Hard feet pounded onto the little deck.

The dark-faced, glowering Joe Koroni stood in the cabin doorway, a gun in each hand.

"Shove 'em up, mug! An' make it fast!"

Two mobsters, the two guards from the Dummy Blatz estate, poked their faces over Joe Koroni's shoulder.

Dummy Blatz yelled, "No, Joe, no! You're making a mistake!"

Koroni's eyes blazed and his guns exploded together. But The Whisperer had moved with the speed of light. The slugs pounded into the wall of the cabin.

AFTER that, Joe Koroni and his hard eggs never could have explained what happened. The cabin was plunged into darkness. Joe Koroni's feet flew from under him. As he fell, a fist smashed into his blue jaw with' crunching force.

It seemed The Whisperer must have used Koroni's flopping body as a weapon. It was as if a battering ram had been hurled broadside into the pair of thugs behind Koroni. One went to the deck,

and there was no doubt but that it was the broad toe of The Whisperer's shoes that thudded into the butt of his right ear.

The other mobster fired two shots from the gun already in his hand but a man can hardly aim accurately when he is performing a backward somersault. This mobster splashed into the river, went down, but came up and caught the side of the gang boat.

The Whisperer now had Joe Koroni by the throat. Koroni's dark eyes were bugging out as the cabin light came into his face and he was looking into the deadly, colorless orbs of the man who held him.

It was Joe Koroni's first view of The Whisperer. If it had not been for the icy eyes, Joe Koroni would have made the same mistake as Dummy Blatz. The Whisperer did not look much like a foe to be feared.

Koroni choked out, "I'll kill you for that!"

From The Whisperer came a weird chuckle! His left hand gripped into Koroni's neck, and his right fist slashed open the mobster's blue chin and set him on his haunches at the far end of the cabin.

"Dummy, tell this halfwit I am the new highway boss of this mob," The Whisperer suggested calmly.

"That's right, Joe," gulped Dummy Blatz. "You made a mistake, Joe. I guess you've found that out. This is my new partner, The Whisperer."

The flat-faced gangster laughed harshly.

"You know, Joe, The Whisperer just bumped off Wildcat Gordon, and that's why I'm here," he said. "Wildcat Gordon and an old man and a dame with him. I think we are going to like The Whisperer, Joe."

The sudden hate that burned in Joe Koroni's black eyes proved he never would like any part of The Whisperer, but he growled, "How the hell was I to know, chief? Didn't I come boiling along to get you out of a jam?"

"Right, Joe," said Dummy Blatz. "Only The Whisperer beat you to it. You other fellows, don't make any mistake. Anybody who could give the works to Wildcat Gordon is good enough for me."

The other two mobsters were in the doorway of the cabin. Their eyes were bugging.

"Joe! Joe, are you hurt?" called out a clear voice.

Redheaded Jerry Connors had come from the other boat. The pretty girl passed The Whisperer, glaring at the little, gray man and dropping on her knees beside Joe Koroni.

"Who is he, Joe? What happened?" exclaimed the girl, the brown eyes showing no recognition of the man with whom she had joined forces to avenge the death of Michael Connors.

"He's the—the new boss of the road, kid!" grunted Joe Koroni.

"Yeah? Well, maybe he is!" flared the girl.

The Whisperer made his ghostly chuckle very silent. What a girl!

BEFORE the boats had returned across the river to Dummy Blatz's stronghold, Detective Sergeant Thorsen had given out the report of Wildcat Gordon's apparent murder on the river.

Mayor Van Royston, with all of his dislike for the police commissioner who had been appointed and held his position over his head, spoke mournfully.

"Perhaps we were a little too hasty in our judgment," stated the mayor. "It is possible if we had let Wildcat Gordon handle it his own way, we would not now be up against both Dummy Blatz and this murderous Whisperer in the truck rackets."

Attorney Pearsall rubbed his hands solemnly.

"For once, I'm sorry I gave the advice I did," he stated slowly. "I always had a sneaking fondness for Commissioner Gordon, even if he did rub me the wrong way most of the time."

Deputy Henry Bolton's round mouth screwed up unpleasantly, but he added a hypocritical word.

"Wildcat was a good man, and we'll miss him," he said.

Detective Sergeant Thorsen looked at the three of them.

"You don't know how we'll miss him!" he rapped out.

It was one of the very few times the face and voice of Sergeant Thorsen were other than wooden in expression.

"I didn't see all that happened on the river," added Sergeant Thorsen. "But there was a whispering voice right after the shooting on that other boat, and then I heard the splash and saw Wildcat go overboard. While we were hunting him and fished out his hat, the other boat got away."

"The Whisperer!" exclaimed Mayor Van Royston.

"My first act as police commissioner," stated Henry Bolton "will be to get The Whisperer."

The hypocritical Henry received a sharp setback.

"You'll be only acting commissioner, Henry," said Mayor Van Royston, "until we have full confirmation of Gordon's death. I suppose he was making a getaway across the river because of that damnable contempt warrant we had sworn out."

The spick-and-span Mayor Van Royston, with all of his upstage ways, apparently was beginning to regret having accepted so much gratis advice.

And in the following few days, Mayor Van Royston was to regret even more deeply the hasty judgment that had unseated Commissioner Wildcat Gordon. With the word of Wildcat's murder on the river, the city underwent one of those sudden revisions of public opinion.

"Get the men who murdered Wildcat Gordon!" the newspapers demanded. "Stop this truck racket over the state line that is robbing our people! Wildcat Gordon would have ended it!"

Added reason for the public outcry was being given. Some new element had entered into the truck and produce racket. In four successive nights, four trucks disappeared with their drivers.

These loaded trucks were the property of Brunn & Brunn, the firm that had defiantly held out against Dummy Blatz and his mob. It was believed, of course, that the drivers of the trucks had been murdered.

Mayor Van Royston was forced into the position of appealing to Sheriff Randolph and the governor of the neighboring State to stop the outlawry. About all the mayor received was a quiet laugh from over the State line.

The big city boiled, but the newspapers were making one mistake. The drivers of those Brunn & Brunn trucks had not been murdered. The Whisperer, the new partner of Dummy Blatz in the racket, had seen to saving these lives. In due time, the drivers would be returned to their homes, but even Dummy Blatz did not know that.

DUMMY BLATZ was afraid. He had a constant fear for the first time in his checkered, bloody career. Willingly enough, he permitted The Whisperer to take over personal collections on the roaring six-lane highway. The little, gray man was riding that road in the night. It was his orders that directed cars and trucks of the mob.

Strangely enough, The Whisperer had one apparently loyal aide on the road. This was no other than Joe Koroni. Koroni appeared to switch his dubious allegiance from Dummy Blatz to The Whisperer.

Joe Koroni was helping with highway collections, with keeping the boys in line. If The Whisperer suspected Koroni was doing a bit more than just keeping the mob in line, his manner never hinted at what he knew.

Jerry Connors maintained her apparently queer loyalty to the dark-faced Koroni. Invariably, she rode with him when his roadster moved through the night. But that was as close as Joe Koroni had ever gotten to the redheaded girl.

"When you're heading this mob, Joe," Jerry Connors would say, "when you have showed what you can do, maybe you can get a marriage license. And that's that."

The rainy weather had cleared away. A moon bathed the six-lane highway the night after the fourth of the Brunn & Brunn trucks had disappeared. There were an unusual number of pleasure cars making their way between the rumbling, roaring freights in the truck lanes. Joe Koroni was

driving a fast black coupé tonight. Jerry Connors sat with one shoulder touching his elbow. The Whisperer drove another of the mob's fastest cars. Some twenty miles above the State line, The Whisperer spotted Joe Koroni's car. He dropped in behind the coupé.

About this time, Koroni said to Jerry Connors, "You've kept the gun wrapped up in that silk handkerchief?"

"I've got the gun wrapped up with the fingerprints on it," said the redheaded girl.

CHAPTER XII
KORONI'S MURDER FRAME-UP

IF The Whisperer had known of the conversation, of the automatic pistol wrapped in a silk handkerchief in the coupé of Joe Koroni, there would have been swift intervention. For The Whisperer had been keeping a watchful, brotherly eye on the spirited redheaded girl.

He was fully aware she was "working on" Joe Koroni. He had managed a few stolen conversations with Jerry Connors.

"It won't be long," the girl had assured him. "Joe Koroni is lining up the mob against Dummy Blatz. Joe doesn't know the big boss across the river. I've tried playing to Dummy, but that's one subject on which his clamshell mouth doesn't open."

The Whisperer was well aware of this. Though he swayed Dummy Blatz by a rule of fear, and was in his confidence, yet the mob chief had not cracked on the name of the political power—the man who swayed such protection as had been secured over the State line, and the one who took the big share of the truck and produce rake-off.

If Jerry Connors had confided tonight's plan of Joe Koroni to The Whisperer, one life might have been saved. As it was, The Whisperer cruised his car easily along in traffic, merely keeping an eye on the Koroni coupé.

Joe Koroni clucked deep in his throat.

"You're one smart kid," he said to Jerry Connors. "Dummy's own gun and only his fingerprints on it. Jano Sarns will be along on his collection route in a few minutes. That's the guy who stands ace-high with the mob, and when we rub him out, it will bring all the mob running. That will be the end of Dummy, then we'll take care of this damned Whisperer in our own way!"

Redheaded Jerry Connors was anything but a tough girl at heart. But these mobsters had murdered her grandfather, the only living relative she had in the world. The girl had steeled her heart to any sacrifice, even to aiding a cold-blooded killing of any of these men, if it would destroy the Dummy Blatz mob.

Joe Koroni's murder plan was simple, or so Jerry Connors believed. "Jano" Sarns would be suddenly blasted. Dummy's own gun, with his fingerprints upon it, would be left near the body. The others of the mob would not stop to reason.

BUT Jerry Connors was making a sad mistake. She had not been quite smart enough to match Joe Koroni's killer brain. Koroni had not the slightest intention of killing one of the mob with Dummy's gun. But he did plan murder—a killing that would involve Dummy Blatz in far more trouble.

This would be a clash with the very political minions that had been giving him protection. An entanglement that would reach deeper. That would bring the anger of the big boss himself upon the unsuspecting Dummy.

Joe Koroni was double-crossing Jerry Connors as well as Dummy Blatz, for the girl had got the gun with Dummy's fingerprints upon it.

The coupé glided alongside a row of booming trucks. Suddenly, the lines of cars halted. Joe Koroni had maneuvered to be at the head of this line. He could see a uniformed county patrolman watching the intersection.

After the red light was on and cross traffic was moving, Koroni suddenly stepped on the gas. His coupé shot across the intersection at high speed, grazing another car.

There was another red light farther down the hill. The coupé was driven onto the shoulder of the road and shot ahead. It crossed against the second red light as the patrolman's motorcycle siren screamed.

Jerry Connors gripped Koroni's arm. "Joe! You gone crazy? You'll get us in a jam!"

"Shut up! I'm runnin' this game, kid! I thought up a new one just now. That cop comin' fast?"

"Yes! Yes! He's just behind us! Joe, please stop!"

Here the shoulder of the six-lane highway was wide. Koroni slid his coupé between halted trucks. The little car sped in a snaky line through the halted traffic.

There was a clear space on the shoulder just ahead. The county patrolman had no means of knowing who was in the offending coupé. He could see a redheaded girl. Probably, he judged the driver was intoxicated, on his way from some roadhouse party.

The siren screamed and the copper risked bumping along the shoulder of the highway. Joe Koroni reached over suddenly and grabbed the silk-wrapped pistol.

Jerry Connors screamed, "No, Joe! What's the matter with you?"

But the mobster's laugh snarled in her ear.

"Dummy'll have some explaining to do now!" he stated.

Koroni fired the rod without removing the silk handkerchief. The head of the county copper was in line with the coupé's window.

The horrified Jerry Connors saw the patrolman's body jump sidewise and into the air. The motorcycle siren ceased screaming and went, end over end, onto the rocks.

Koroni's hard arm blocked the girl back in the seat of the coupé.

"Hang on!" he gritted. "We've gotta lam fast!"

He pulled the steering wheel around, braking down, but letting the little car smash into the rocks with sufficient force to smash its front. Then he permitted Dummy's pistol to slide from the silk handkerchief to the floor of the coupé.

Before anyone in the line of traffic understood the tragedy being enacted near them on the moonlighted, roaring road, Koroni was pulling the redheaded girl from the wrecked car.

Jerry Connors attempted to jerk loose from the mobster, but his laugh snarled in her ear.

"Fine! Fine! Like to stay here, huh? You've been smart, kid, but not quite smart enough for Joe! Stick around and you'll have that copper's murder pinned on you! From now on, I'll be the boss of what you do!"

THE redheaded girl was terrified. She was in a worse spot than even Joe Koroni knew. For already she had been saved from the law of this same county when she had rubbed out a mobster who had killed her grandfather.

Sobbing, chilled over the brutality of what had happened, the girl could only do as Joe Koroni told her. He ran along the shoulder of the road, gripping the girl's wrist.

Before occupants of other cars had got to the spot where the motorcycle copper had pitched into the rocks with a bullet in his head, or to the coupé with the discharged pistol on its floor, Joe Koroni was pulling Jerry Connor into another car.

This car was a sedan carrying four other men, and it had been waiting. One of the men said, "You pull it, Joe?"

"Nice and sweet!" rapped Koroni. "Step on it! We've got to get out of here and be set for the big blow-off! Sometime tonight, Dummy's due to cross the river with the month's take for the big boss! Are the other fellows ready?"

"They'll back you up, Joe," stated the other man. "We ain't had any use for Dummy since this Whisperer put the fear in him!"

Jerry Connors shrank into the rear seat, her heart a lump of lead in her bosom. She thought she never would forget the young face of that county copper as a bullet blasted into his brain and his body pitched into the air.

If she could only get to The Whisperer! She

judged the time had come for her strange, uncanny friend to strike!

But The Whisperer was not yet ready.

He had seen Joe Koroni beat that red light, and the start of the chase by the county patrolman. For once, The Whisperer was mystified. It looked like pure dumbness on the part of Koroni. What was he trying to do?

The Whisperer's own car roared along behind the motorcycle copper. But just before the patrolman overtook the Koroni coupé, a slowly moving truck blocked him. The Whisperer saw the red slash of fire leap from the window of the coupé.

Then the motorcycle cop was in the air, turning over. The coupé was crumpling its radiator on the rocks. The Whisperer jumped from his own car' and ran along the line of trucks.

He looked down at the huddled body of the copper. A thin thread of blood ran down from a blue hole in the patrolman's temple. A bullet had gone directly into his brain.

No other person had reached the scene. The Whisperer jerked open the door of the smashed and abandoned coupé. The automatic pistol was lying on the floor. The Whisperer's flashlight beam picked it out.

There was more than the fingerprints of Dummy Blatz on that gun. Dummy had the conceit of many of his kind. The butt of the gun bore small initials in gold. They were D.B.

No more than ten seconds passed before The Whisperer had added up the total. The dead county patrolman in the ditch… The ambition of Joe Koroni to become the racket boss on this side… The pistol left in the car…

Whether the authorities wanted it or not, public opinion would burn Dummy Blatz out of his safe retreat over the State line. But The Whisperer had no intention of permiting this to happen.

Dummy Blatz, held on a murder rap he could not beat, would be of no service in leading The Whisperer to the big boss.

The Whisperer slipped the pistol into his clothing. He ran back toward his own car and was driving out of the tangle of cars before others reached the scene of the murder.

When the time came, if necessary, he might reveal to Dummy Blatz how he had saved him from his first aide's frame-up. In the meantime, The Whisperer had set tonight for one more coup that would put him in stronger with the mobleader.

Before the county authorities started their check-up on the mystery of the murdered patrolman, deciding it had been some drunken driver, as there were only hot plates on the car, The Whisperer was heading down the six-lane highway for the State line. He was on his way back into the city.

IN the meantime, two of the Dummy Blatz mob had been close when The Whisperer removed Dummy Blatz's pistol. They were in another car and they wanted no part of the murder, but they joined Joe Koroni in an abandoned warehouse on the river less than an hour later.

A radio news report was turned on and Koroni was listening to the police report of the patrolman's killing. Listening and swearing with bitter virulence.

"What the hell do you suppose happened?" he grated to the dozen men of the mob then with him. "If they'd found that gun, it would be pinned on Dummy by this time! His fingerprints, and even his gold initials!"

"I'll tell you what happened, Joe," said one of the men. "Our new road boss, The Whisperer, got that gun. We saw him take it and scram."

There was murder suddenly blazing in Joe Koroni's eyes.

CHAPTER XIII
A WHISPERING VISIT

WHILE Joe Koroni was turning the air blue and forming hasty plans for a new move to take over the mob, Detective Sergeant Thorsen was sitting at his desk in police headquarters. Mayor Van Royston was talking with Deputy Henry Bolton.

"Attorney Pearsall has done all he could, Henry," the mayor was declaring. "The party will not stand for you being made commissioner after that Morganston affair. Only the return of the jewels will get you the job."

Old Quick Trigger came shuffling through the doorway, with a mournful face. He rubbed his bald head nervously. He went over to Sergeant Thorsen's desk.

"Any word of Wildcat?" he said, and there was no hope in his voice.

"Afraid not, but maybe there is, and I would just as soon it wasn't true," said Sergeant Thorsen. "They've picked up a body down by the island, and it's about Wildcat's size. But we haven't had time yet to identify it."

Tears glistened in old Quick Trigger's eyes. The

former deputy could put on a show when necessary. Mayor Van Royston's personal adviser came into the office. Attorney Pearsall seldom permitted his dignity to be upset. But his square face was red, and his hands were not rubbing together as customary.

"Mayor Van Royston, there's hell to pay now!" he stated. "The Whisperer has been identified as being at the scene of a new murder over the line! This time it's one of the county policemen! It seems pretty positive The Whisperer comes and goes from the city as he pleases! I would say it was time for your police to round him up!"

Deputy Bolton sputtered as usual, but he had no suggestions to offer.

"We drove The Whisperer out of the city!" he blustered. "And that's why he's hooked up with this Dummy Blatz! He wouldn't show his head over that State line!"

The telephone on Sergeant Thorsen's desk buzzed. Thorsen was talking for a few seconds. His wooden face turned toward the other men.

"I think you're wrong, Deputy Bolton," he said evenly. "We just now have a report that the month's collections of Brunn & Brunn have been snatched from their office. Both partners were knocked out."

"Well, what's that got to do with it?" snapped Deputy Bolton.

"They say a whispering voice warned them they would pay protection to Dummy Blatz, or the next time more than their money would be gone," said Sergeant Thorsen calmly.

Attorney Pearsall exploded.

"I've got some business to attend to promptly!" he exclaimed. "And it has to do with the ineffectiveness of the police department!"

Before Mayor Van Royston could reply, Attorney Pearsall strode angrily from the room.

THE report of fifty thousand grabbed from the office of Brunn & Brunn was slightly incorrect, but only to the extent of its being $47,689.

The month's collections on the true routes had been assembled on the desk between Adolph and Simon Brunn. They were hard-headed truck line owners, having come up from drivers' seats.

"It's been a good month," said Adolph, "but with them four trucks knocked off, we can't renew our insurance. So what do we do, Simon?"

"We'll run trucks if I have to wipe out this Dummy Blatz myself!" raged Simon. "I'll never pay a penny of protection!"

The partner brothers were alone in the office on the eighteenth floor of a downtown building. They had finished counting and sorting a pile of cash and checks. The door of their big safe stood open. They would bank the money in the morning.

A rap came at the door to the outside office and the janitor's voice said, "You fellows want your place cleaned up tonight?"

"Sure! Sure!" replied one of the Brunns, gathering the money from the desk. "I'll be right out!"

The Brunns heard a key turned in the outside door. Heavy steps came across the outer office.

"Just a minute, Mart!" called one of the Brunns, wishing the money to be in the safe before the janitor came in.

But the man outside did not wait a minute. The lights in both offices went out. The inner door swung with a snap that threatened to break its glass.

"What in the devil, Mart?" shouted one of the Brunns.

"Stay where you are!" came a weird, icy whisper. "Don't move, if you want to live! I've come for the protection money!"

Oaths spilled from Adolph and Simon. One of the brothers dived for a desk drawer and came up with a revolver. The gun burst into explosive flame and bullets pounded at the place by the door from which the whisper had sounded.

The revolver suddenly ceased to explode and it banged on the desk. Fingers with the grip of steel claws had caught the brother with the gun. A padded blackjack cracked in exactly the right spot behind one ear.

Before the other brother could move, he was being expertly arm-twisted into a chair. In spite of his strength, his bellowing rage, steel handcuffs clicked on his wrists and his hands had been drawn through the back of the chair before they snapped.

The money could be heard as it was stuffed into some sort of bag. Soft soles shuffled toward the door. Then the whisper came again, eerily penetrating.

"This is your protection money for six months! You will start paying on the dot from now on, or the next time more than your money will be taken! One of you will be left to carry on the business! That is all!"

The weird whisper faded out. There was only silence and darkness. The brother in the chair hunched over the desk, nosed the telephone from its place and called the police.

THE night had been crowded, but while Deputy Henry Bolton was throwing squad after squad into the underworld, in the ever vain hope of catching up with The Whisperer, that elusive partner in the racket with Dummy Blatz was walking into the office of the mobleader in his River Road stronghold.

"What the hell's all this up on the highway, Whisperer?" demanded Dummy Blatz. "There wouldn't be any of our boys mixed up in bumping off that county copper, would there? That would raise merry hell!"

The Whisperer reached under his baggy coat and pulled out two objects. One was Dummy's gold-initialed pistol; the other was a canvas sack. He laid the gun on the desk in front of Dummy.

"Here's the gun that killed the county cop, Dummy," he said, calmly. "I wouldn't know who used it but it was one of the mob; and that gun was left planted in a car beside the body."

Beads of sweat suddenly popped out on Dummy's flat forehead. Fear leaped into his light eyes.

"One of the boys, Whisperer?"

"One of our nice boys, Dummy. So I did you the favor of removing the evidence!"

"Thanks, Whisperer. I'm owing you a lot, it seems."

The Whisperer's ghostly chuckle made Dummy shiver. It always had that effect.

"And here, Dummy, is the first installment of protection from Brunn & Brunn," The Whisperer said casually. "I dropped by on the way and picked up their month's collections. I think we'll have no trouble with them from now on."

Dummy's mouth flopped open. He stared unbelievingly at this modest-appearing gray man with the nerves of ice and the coldness in action of cutting steel.

"You done that, Whisperer, and brought it in?"

"When I'm in, I'm in, Dummy. Now suppose you come across with something I want to know? After tonight, anything might happen to you. I want to know all about the big boss and the political fix he swings, or I don't go on with you."

Dummy Blatz nodded slowly. He was about to speak when the telephone rang. Dummy talked.

"Yes—no—The Whisperer—no, you're wrong, boss. I know all about that bump-off—and—what? Sure. Don't I know he rapped the Brunns! I've got nearly fifty grand of their money right here on the desk to prove it!"

The Whisperer stood tense, but his appearance did not show it. He was looking at the door of the office leading into an inner room. That door had moved the smallest fraction of an inch, but his keen eyes had caught it.

Dummy was still talking. The Whisperer walked toward the wall. Then he whipped across the office

with the speed of a striking snake. The door slammed open. But there was no one there.

The Whisperer was sure Joe Koroni had been listening. That dark-faced mobster was fast. He had removed himself in time. The Whisperer came back to Dummy's desk, saying nothing.

Dummy replaced the phone. He looked up at The Whisperer, with a tight smile across his clamshell mouth.

"Well, Whisperer, you're in further than you know," he stated. "The big boss wants to see you.

I'm taking the month's stuff across the river tonight, like I always do. It runs nearly half a million, all in cash. That's the way we've been doing it."

"That's what I wanted to hear, Dummy. And the big boss wants you to bring me along, is that it?"

"That's it, Whisperer. I guess he figures you've been going strong enough to have your say. I'm agreeing with him. After tonight, you an' me will have the sweetest racket of the big town under our

own shirts. And when you get back, we're cleaning up this mob. I'm finding out who planted that gun tonight."

THE WHISPERER nodded and said unexpectedly, "All right, Dummy. After we see the big boss and get back, I'll tell you who planted that gun to put a murder rap on you. You're a damn fool if you don't know already."

Dummy Blatz started pulling wrapped packages of money from his safe. The Whisperer saw packet after packet of greenbacks.

Dummy said, "We've always played smart on this, too. There ain't any new money in our stuff and no numbers running serially, in case anything should happen."

The Whisperer agreed that this was smart. His brain was racing. Probably there never would be more than this one chance to get at the big boss in the city. No doubt, he was someone of such importance that the evidence against him would have to be foolproof.

"Who is the big boss, Dummy?" he inquired.

Dummy Blatz shook his head.

"That's for him to say, Whisperer. I know where he lives, but I've never seen him myself. I wouldn't even know his voice. The take is never delivered directly to him. He will see you, Whisperer, but you'll not see him."

CHAPTER XIV
SMART JOE KORONI

THE weasel-eyed Joe Koroni had been listening at the door of Dummy Blatz's room. He had been watching The Whisperer closely. The sleek, quick mobster removed himself from the door and the room before The Whisperer had detected him.

A dozen of the mob were in the little house by the motor entrance. The redheaded Jerry Connors was telling them a story. That amazing Irish girl had a way with her that completely fooled the tough eggs of the gang.

Joe Koroni burst into the little house.

"All the choppers and ring the place!" his command snapped out. "Dummy and The Whisperer will be going to see the big boss within a few minutes! I don't know which boat they'll use, but they have to reach the river! Don't stop to talk it over when you see them with the bag of dough! Start blastin'!"

Jerry Connors lost the impish smile that had concealed her real emotions. She started unobtrusively gliding toward the door. Joe Koroni whipped over beside her.

"Nothin' doin', kid!" he grated, seizing one of her wrists and twisting it. "Your stomach went weak out on the highway when I bumped that cop!

You're staying right here with us!"

The redheaded girl saw the treacherous mobsters pulling machine guns from under the floor where they had been cached.

"It's a rub-out!" directed Joe Koroni. "Alla yuh' get this story straight! We saw Dummy Blatz start to deliver the month's take to the big boss! The Whisperer jumped him and knocked him over, tryin' to make a getaway with that half a million! So we had to burn The Whisperer!"

"O.K.," came a grunted acquiescence.

This was to the liking of the killers originally assembled by Dummy Blatz. Koroni had convinced them that Dummy was only a figurehead and getting more than his share of the truck and produce racket collections. Every man there feared the uncanny, killing Whisperer. His methods of dealing with them on the road had been tough.

"But you don't know the big boss, Joe," said one of the men.

Koroni's shrewdness was then demonstrated.

"That's right," he admitted. "But he'll be waiting for Dummy to cross the river with the month's take. As soon as we've mopped up, I'll be answering the telephone. Get the idea? The big boss will be calling, and when he finds out we've saved the month's collection and poor Dummy got himself rubbed-out by The Whisperer, then we got The Whisperer—well, what do you think?"

No extraordinary reasoning was needed to see the point Koroni was making. With that half million saved and Dummy Blatz dead, Joe Koroni would be in. He would be next in line with the big boss.

Jerry Connors had a weak, sick feeling. If she could only get to The Whisperer, warn him! But Koroni's beady, black eyes stayed on the redheaded girl. She had wanted him to become boss of the mob. Well, she would get her wish!

AT this same time, The Whisperer was preparing to leave the office with Dummy Blatz. The half million in greenbacks was packed into a disreputable-looking old leather suitcase. The Whisperer moved toward one window.

The moon had dropped low in the west. But light filtered through trees around the big house. Shadows flitted across these illuminated paths. The Whisperer's eyes caught the pale outline of a face turned upward.

He became fully aware then that Joe Koroni was making his bid for power. The weasel-eyed mobster was ready to strike. The Whisperer moved back beside Dummy Blatz and for a minute said nothing.

He was thinking it was important that he got to Jerry Connors. He examined his two silenced pistols, made sure they were fully loaded. Where would the girl be keeping herself?

"The redheaded dame, Dummy?" he said. "Is she in the house? I don't trust her any too much."

Dummy's pale eyes held a tricky, hard light. His clamshell mouth opened a trifle in one of its rare grins.

"She's out with Koroni, as usual," he stated. "She'll be all right with him. You haven't been fooling me, Whisperer. Nobody but Joe pulled that murder frame-up with the cop."

"You're smart enough," stated The Whisperer. "I only asked about the girl, because your idea we're going to see the big boss tonight is all wet. If we start for the river, it's a thousand-to-one shot we're walking right into a ready-made barrage of choppers!"

Dummy's clamshell mouth still held that fixed grin.

"I wouldn't be surprised," he stated. "But we'll get to the river, and we'll cross it! Come on!"

The big safe in which the money and records were kept suddenly swung back. The Whisperer had underestimated Dummy Blatz. There was a stairway leading downward. Dummy carried the suitcase containing the package of money.

The step ended in an unlighted tunnel, so Dummy used a flashlight. The passageway dripped with oozing water. The Whisperer judged they must have walked nearly half a mile before he heard the lapping of little waves.

"Here we are," stated Dummy Blatz. "Slip into them oilskins. Now we're just another pair of fishermen beating it out to sea in our old boat."

THE tunnel had opened under an old fishing dock. An open fishing boat with a boxed-in motor looked old enough and leaky enough to be what it seemed.

Dummy had on the oilskins and a rubber helmet pulled over his face. He supplied The Whisperer with a similar outfit.

Then Dummy showed greater confidence in his strange partner.

"Just in case anything might happen to me, Whisperer, there's an address on the back page of a notebook in one of my pockets," he said. "You'll know it anyway, in a little while, so I'm telling you about it now. You'll probably be surprised at the class of the place I'm taking you to."

"Better tell me now," said The Whisperer.

"No. If anything happens, it's where I said. Let's get this wheezy engine started."

The old fishing boat was a slow, clumsy craft. No doubt, Dummy Blatz had used it often for crossing the river, the State line. It was so like hundreds of others, it would hardly have been suspected.

The Whisperer was greatly worried. What would happen to Jerry Connors when Dummy's trick was

discovered? Dummy had been smart not to have taken Joe Koroni in on that secret tunnel to the river.

For all of his murder record, The Whisperer was compelled to admire Dummy's cleverness. But this was putting Jerry Connors on a spot, where even her active brain might not extricate her.

The old boat vibrated and moved. The Whisperer had to chance that the redheaded girl would take care of herself for the time. Perhaps when Joe Koroni failed to intercept Dummy Blatz, Jerry would take a run-out powder.

The fishing boat was far out on the dark river, where the sinking moon made it only a chugging shadow when Joe Koroni went into the big house and came dashing out. His speech for the moment was unprintable.

"Somebody went out in a boat above here a little while ago," stated one of the mobsters.

Koroni did not understand it even then. He had seen Dummy Blatz start on his trip across the river many times. He knew Dummy's method of using an old fishing boat and where this craft was kept. But he had never known of the secret tunnel, did not know of it now.

"That damn Whisperer's tricked it some way!" gritted Joe. "Up to the dock!"

Jerry Connors thrilled with hope. She knew The Whisperer could not have beaten that ring of choppers around the house. But he had gotten Dummy Blatz out on the river.

THE clumsy, old fishing boat made heavy work of its job. The middle of the river was half a mile out and, to The Whisperer, it seemed the craft scarcely moved. The moon was nearly down and its half light afforded almost as much concealment as did the darkness.

Nothing showed on the river around them, except a few riding lights of boats overclose to the city waterfront. There was little wind and only the tug of the tidal current checked the progress of the chugging boat.

"So it was Joe Koroni who tried to frame me?" said Dummy Blatz, in a musing tone. "You know what we'll do, Whisperer! When we talk with the big boss, we won't go back across the river! I've another hangout spotted, have had for a long time, and we'll go there. You an' me will have a new mob, and we'll be burnin' the hell out of Koroni's crowd before they know what's happening!"

"Yes, we'll do that, Dummy," replied The Whisperer. "But I wouldn't be too sure about it. That shadow streaking down the river behind us isn't anything but a—-"

The Whisperer did not finish his warning. The streaking body on the water abruptly ceased to be a

shadow. Owing to the deceptiveness of the faint moonlight, it had run close to the old fishing boat on a silenced motor.

Twin searchlights leaped into life. They sliced across the old fishing boat with blinding intensity. The Whisperer had only a glimpse of Joe Koroni, erect on the bow of a long, black speedboat, with a light machine gun across one arm.

Koroni had employed the best of strategy. Once before, he had been knocked out on this same river by The Whisperer. This time, he was taking no chances. The noisy old engine of the fishing boat had been in his favor.

Now, as the lights leaped on, Koroni was set and ready with his chopper. Dummy Blatz was not fast enough. Blue flame ripped across between the boat and the gunwale of the fishing boat. Slugs ripped at the body of Dummy Blatz, jerked him around in the boat.

The life went out of Dummy's pale eyes. His clamshell mouth opened wider than The Whisperer had ever seen it. Blood and a death scream came together. The slugs from Koroni's chopper had cut a swath across Dummy's thick stomach.

The highway racket boss flopped to the bottom of the boat with one big arm thrown across the old leather suitcase. Even as he threw himself flat, whipping out a silenced automatic, The Whisperer noted the blood of the mobster was staining the leather of the case containing the money.

Dummy Blatz had made his last delivery across the State line. The Whisperer had been quick enough to miss the withering line of bullets. The slugs still chewed into the side of the fishing boat, but the bottom of the cockpit was below the waterline.

The shape of Joe Koroni's erect figure could be seen between the cutting beams of the searchlights. Koroni's hard voice rapped out:

"Hold off, mugs! I got 'em! We'll grab that dough an' tow the boat back across! We want both them stiffs to show to the big boss!"

The Whisperer sighted the deadly, silenced pistol a few inches below the sound of Koroni's voice. Its lethal dose was about to leap out, when The Whisperer withheld his pull on the trigger.

Directly over one of Joe Koroni's shoulders loomed the white, pretty face of Jerry Connors. Her young voice rang out vibrantly:

"He was the only friend I had left in the whole world! And you've killed him!"

Very apparently, the redheaded girl was not speaking of Dummy Blatz. The Whisperer dared not risk a bullet. He started raising himself slowly, but he could not act quickly enough. Neither could Joe Koroni.

"Why, you little—"

Koroni got out three hard-bitten words, and that was all. His chopper spewed bullets even as the treacherous mobster went into the black water of the river.

Jerry Connors' arms were locked about Koroni's neck, and the bow of the long speedboat rocked as the two went under together.

THE WHISPERER cast aside all caution. He raised himself to seek the oily circle where Koroni and Jerry Connors had gone down. Oaths slapped at him from the mobsters' boat.

One man got a chopper into play. His shooting was not accurate, but two slugs whined off the side of the boat and caught The Whisperer along the ribs, spinning him around.

He fell across the body of Dummy Blatz, feeling his own blood beginning to trickle. He had no means of knowing whether the bullets were deep or superficial, but his one hand was still good.

There was a hissing sound as of compressed air being released from a tank. The mobster with the chopper jumped straight into the air and fell into the river. Two others close to him fell to the deck.

Others ducked for the doorway of the speedboat cabin.

CHAPTER XV
WHO IS THE BIG BOSS?

THE motor of the speedboat had been choked down. Apparently, one of the mobsters attempted to open the throttle. The engine choked and quit. The old engine of the fishing boat was still shoving it slowly along.

The speed was sufficient to leave the drifting speedboat, being swept downstream on the tidal current. The Whisperer felt his side throbbing and his clothes stiffening, but he could move.

He got to the rope handling the slow boat's rudder and circled the craft. At this moment, he knew he had been rendered powerless for attempting to swim, or to rescue Jerry Connors.

What a girl!

Doubtlessly she had gone to the bottom, been swept away on the tide with her arms still vised around Joe Koroni's neck. Knowing her as he did, The Whisperer muttered, "She'll never let him go while he's alive."

He feared his continued circling of the spot was useless. The speedboat had drifted from view at this minute. The surface of the river showed nothing. The Whisperer shook his head sadly.

But he had this job to see through. Letting the fishing boat follow an erratic, slow course, he fumbled a note book from one pocket of the dead Dummy Blatz. He risked a momentary flick of his flashlight.

"Hellamighty!" he exclaimed. "Up in Parkside! It couldn't be! *That's it!"*

The address on the back page of the black notebook was Apartment K, 1177 Parkside Avenue.

The Whisperer was staring at the little book, at the address. A weird ghostly chuckle came to his lips.

"Now that will be something," he murmured, in his husky voice.

"What will be something, Dunk Smith?"

THE vibrant, clear voice came out of the darkness, out of nowhere. The Whisperer swore shortly, flipping the flashlight to one side. The dripping, glistening red hair of Jerry Connors appeared over one side of the slow-moving boat.

"Well, you might give me a hand in!" she said brightly. "This water could be warmer!"

The Whisperer moved stiffly. His left arm hung limply at his side.

"No! No! You're hurt!" cried out the redheaded girl. "I can manage O.K. Well, Dunk Smith, that's that!"

The amazing Jerry Connors was as beautiful as any mermaid that ever lured a sailor onto the rocks. Her thin dress clung to her curving figure. But The Whisperer was staring at the object in her hand.

The girl followed the direction of his eyes.

"I've heard a pistol won't explode underwater," she said calmly. "Maybe Joe Koroni carried a better gun than most of them."

She dropped the weapon on the floor of the fishing boat.

"You got his gun and—" began The Whisperer.

"Let's don't talk about it, Dunk Smith. You're hurt. It looks as if the job is finished, so let's get to some dry place."

The Whisperer said, "You're one in a million, Jerry Connors! But the job isn't finished by at least ninety percent! Before the night is over, I intend to have the man behind the murder of your grandfather!"

"The big boss?" breathed Jerry Connors.

"The big boss," stated The Whisperer. "Help me open that suitcase."

The redheaded girl's eyes widened as she looked at the dozens of flat packages of currency.

"There must be all of a million here, Dunk Smith!"

"Anyway, half of that," he replied. "But it's worth ten million to the big town. Here, help me. I'll show you."

Jerry Connors was a good soldier. The Whisperer had an idea. Along with the more gentle Tiny Traeger, here would be a woman dick worth a lot to the department. They did not have women detectives. Only policewomen and matrons.

The Whisperer decided to think this over, if he

got out of this jam alive and still out of jail. The big boss? If he could fasten the racket upon him, wouldn't the big town rock!

But the evidence would have to be iron-clad, conclusive. There was adequate reason why the big boss had not shown his face to even Dummy Blatz.

AT The Whisperer's direction, Jerry Connors was tearing a small corner off one greenback in the center of each of the tightly banded packages. He said, "Now, I'll show you what to do with them."

"And then," said the girl, "if they get this money on someone, the big boss maybe, it will—"

Z-roor! screamed a glancing bullet from the river near the slowly chugging fishing boat.

The mobsters had gotten their engine started again. The speedboat was rapidly approaching. But the fishing boat was within a few yards of an old wharf. The Whisperer sent a double burst from his silenced guns at the shadow of the speedboat. The mobsters shied off.

"You'll have to give me a hand, Jerry," said The Whisperer. "We must get Dummy Blatz and the money off of this boat."

The redheaded girl was pale and it only made her freckles all the more attractive, but she was game. She helped The Whisperer get the limp, soggy body of Dummy Blatz up on the wharf. Here The Whisperer gained some strength.

A long tool box sat at one side of the wharf. The speedboat of the mobsters was coming, closer again. The mobsters had ceased shooting, were attempting to make a landing. The Whisperer heard the craft rub along the wharf piling.

When he lifted the lid, the long tool box was half empty. The Whisperer did one thing very carefully before he dumped the body of Dummy Blatz into the tool box and dropped the lid. He could hear the mobsters shouting and swearing. Apparently they had found the old fishing boat.

Perhaps it had been their hope that The Whisperer had dropped. Joe Koroni had given them the idea of keeping the bodies of Dummy and his eerie partner. They could have had no thought that the redheaded girl had come up from the river alone.

Possibly, a leader of the dozen mobsters had already sprung up. He may have been hoping to step into the shoes of Joe Koroni.

By this time, The Whisperer was compelled to permit the vital Jerry Connors to carry the leather suitcase. In fact, his movements were halting, and he had to lean on one of the girl's shoulders.

"If this works out, you'll be public heroine No. 1," promised The Whisperer. "Wait until I see Wildcat Gordon."

"I don't want to be a heroine," said Jerry Connors. "I only want Michael to rest in peace."

The frustrated mobsters were now trailing along the waterfront street. The Whisperer could see their shadows moving from spot to spot.

"Walk into that drugstore up ahead, Jerry, and wait for me," he directed.

He was sure the mobsters would not be expecting to see the girl. In this, he was correct. The gangsters were given a glimpse of The Whisperer's elusive figure.

They were closing in, but he vanished. He had reached a police call box wisely placed in the concealment of a waterfront alley. The dental plates came from The Whisperer's mouth.

"Detective Sergeant Thorsen?" he requested.

He failed to get Sergeant Thorsen. This was no time for delay.

"Then Deputy Bolton!" he rapped out.

Deputy Henry Bolton started to let a squawk from his round month as he heard Wildcat's concise words.

"No, I'm not dead! You'll do exactly as I say, or I'll personally separate your head from your skinny neck! You get a squad down here and pick up that body of Dummy Blatz! Don't let anyone but the medical examiner touch it! Do that and you'll collect a lot of glory that isn't coming to you! Look out for some rats that may start trouble!"

FIVE minutes later, Wildcat had the home of Sergeant Thorsen. He gave the wooden-faced sergeant an address.

"Give me half an hour, Sergeant Thorsen!" he directed. "Have my good friend, Mayor Van Royston, with your squads! Close in on that Parkside building, but don't make a move until I come out! If I don't come out in exactly forty minutes from now, break into Apartment K if you have to use axes!"

Once more The Whisperer replaced his dental plates. In a few minutes, he rejoined Jerry Connors at the all-night drugstore. They walked together from the drugstore toward a corner where The Whisperer could see a taxicab standing.

Suddenly, from the shadows of the building two figures emerged swiftly. Each man held a gun in one hand.

"The girl got out!" said one, with an oath. "Well, Whisperer, the game's up!"

Jerry Connors stood rigid, hanging onto the leather suitcase. The Whisperer appeared about ready to fall, leaning his weight on one of her shoulders.

The two mobsters strode forward confidently. One reached his hand for the leather bag. A flash of blue smoke seemed to come from one of The Whisperer's pockets. There was a slow hissing, like the release of compressed air.

Both mobsters dropped their guns. The man

reaching for the bag sat down on the sidewalk, his eyes glazing. The other started running. But he did not run more than ten yards before he pitched forward and butted his head into the wall of the building.

A taxicab driver had seen the sudden holdup and the men falling. He could not understand it. But he decided it was not a healthy place for him. His cab was moving when Jerry Connors reached the running board.

"You've got a couple of passengers, buddy!" she snapped. "And don't make any mistake about it!"

One of The Whisperer's silenced pistols was pushed into the driver's face. "Yes, miss," stated the taximan. "I've got a couple of passengers."

Jerry helped The Whisperer into the cab. She gave the driver an address a block from the Parkside apartment house.

The taxicab whirled away when its passengers had been deposited. Possibly, he would make no report to the police. Drivers did not pick up twenty bucks of easy money by talking too much.

The Whisperer felt himself going, but clenched his teeth. Jerry was still carrying the leather case with the money when they entered the ornate lobby of 1177 Parkside Avenue. The Whisperer was still wearing the long oilskins. They concealed the one blood-soaked leg of his trousers.

"Here, you two!" rapped out an important, uniformed hallman. "What's your business in here? You can't come walking into this kind of place!"

CHAPTER XVI
MEET THE BIG BOSS

"I'm going up to Apartment K," said The Whisperer, in his husky voice. "I've business there! I'm expected!"

The doorman's manner underwent a swift change. His eyes slanted at the leather suitcase.

"Well, why didn't you say that in the first place!" he snapped.

The Whisperer was thinking fast. He pulled Jerry Connors to one side.

"You stay here," he directed. "I have fifteen minutes. If I am not back, you will see some coppers come in. See that they grab that doorman and get to Apartment K."

"But you can't make it," pleaded the redheaded girl. "Your face is white, and you're about all in."

"I'll make it!" promised The Whisperer grimly.

The elevator shot him up ten floors. The operator said Apartment K was around a corner to the right. Before the soundproof door, The Whisperer set the suitcase down and gathered his remaining strength. Then he pushed the button.

Not one, but two men opened the door. Both

were clad in the proper habiliments of a butler. Their arms were stiffly at their sides, but their eyes were cold and shifty.

One said, "You've come alone? Where is Dummy Blatz?"

The door had already closed. The Whisperer found himself in the reception room of one of the city's most luxurious apartments. Other rooms extended in two directions.

"I will tell the big boss that," said The Whisperer.

The man nodded curtly and the two walked beside him into an inner room. There, both suddenly gripped his arms, twisting the suitcase from his grasp and depositing it upon a table. Their hands relieved him expertly of his two silenced pistols.

"I thought this was a friendly visit," stated The Whisperer, but his voice was low and quiet. "Mind if I sit down?"

His side was burning, and his brain was whirling. He felt he could stand no longer. It would be fatal to pass out.

From somewhere came a muffled, heavy voice.

"It is a friendly visit. So you are The Whisperer? Why have you come without Dummy Blatz?"

"I was unable to carry a dead man," replied The Whisperer evenly, his colorless eyes searching the walls about him.

But he did not locate the concealed speaking device. No doubt, the big boss was sizing him up from his concealment.

"A dead man?" said the heavy voice. "What happened? No, you don't need to tell me. I have been watching Joe Koroni for some time. So he got Dummy? How did you happen to get away?'

"I had some luck," stated The Whisperer. "Joe Koroni did not have so much. He is also very dead."

A hard laugh came from behind the wall.

"I'm beginning to think, Whisperer, that you are not overrated," spoke the voice. "Open up the suitcase, boys. So, you could have gone away with the month's take, but you brought it along with you."

"When I take it on the lam I want more than half a million," stated The Whisperer. "I need you, but you need me as much as I need you, so what?"

THE hard laugh came again. The butler-clad "boys" pulled open the leather suitcase. The well-wrapped greenbacks spilled out in their square, little packs.

"There's an extra fifty grand in there I took personally from Brunn & Brunn," said The Whisperer. "Seeing it was my job, I want a fifty-fifty split on it." The two men at the table shot swift, surprised glances at The Whisperer. Their glances showed they expected dire things to happen to him.

"You've got the devil and all of a nerve!" exploded the heavy voice behind the wall. "What

makes you think you can dictate to me?"

"Fifty-fifty," repeated The Whisperer, without raising his voice. "It goes on that basis or not at all. Come to think of it, all of the racket goes on that basis from now on, and I'll form my own mob and do the paying off."

The hard voice laughed again.

"I don't know but I'll take you up on that, Whisperer. You don't look like much, but you've proved a lot. All right, you can't stay here any longer. You've seen to the 'disposal' of Dummy Blatz?"

"I've seen to it, boss, and I'm taking over the place on the River Road. You can call me there. Perhaps you want to count the money?"

"I never had to count it, and when I do, it will be unfortunate," said the voice behind the wall. "When I call you, I will give you a telephone number. The next delivery will be at another address."

The Whisperer got weakly to his feet. The two men walked beside him to the door. That voice behind the wall could never be identified, but the address had been sufficient for The Whisperer.

He stepped into the elevator, leaning against a wall. The colored operator shot the cage downward. Suddenly, The Whisperer's hand reached over and switched off the controls. One hard fist snapped up. The colored boy's chin was different from that of Joe Louis'.

The operator fell with his mouth sagging open. He knew nothing of the swift transformation that took place in his queer passenger with the pointed chin. A little later, he was to make a wild report of what had happened to him.

But that report did not include the gaudily clad man with the droop-brimmed hat who walked down the final flights of stairs.

THE uniformed floorman joined Jerry Connors in staring at this unexpected figure. Though his wounds were weakening, Wildcat Gordon had cocked his army hat at an angle, supplied one of those mysterious red carnations, and strode with quick, jerky movements of his bright, yellow shoes.

Jerry Connors cried out, "Commissioner Gordon! I'd rather see you than any other person in the world!"

"Little Jerry Connors!" exclaimed Wildcat, as if he had not seen the fiery, redheaded girl for days. "What are you doing here?"

Excited words spilled from Jerry's curving lips.

"Your friend, Dunk Smith! The man you sent to the store to help me! He's up there! Up in Apartment K! He said the police were coming! For me to wait!"

"Yes?" snapped Wildcat's brittle voice. "And you, hold it a minute before I open you up!"

The last was addressed to the uniformed floorman. The man had made a quick movement toward the switchboard opposite the elevators. The girl operator was plugging in a room number.

A pistol from Wildcat's coat jammed into the floorman's stomach.

"Grab that phone operator, Jerry!" commanded Wildcat.

The operator let out a scream, attempted to say something into the mouthpiece of her headset. Tight as the situation was, Wildcat was forced to grin.

Jerry Connors' balled fist literally knocked the girl operator loose from her headset. It was a hard, smacking blow that altered the shape of the operator's nose and sent her chair and herself banging over.

Thereupon, the tough Jerry Connors planted one small foot firmly upon the other girl's stomach, her quick hand sweeping all the cords and plugs free from the switchboard.

"Good girl!" approved Wildcat. "Think you can hold this Parkside Cossack here, Jerry? It may be two minutes, and it may be ten, but you'll have help enough quickly!"

"Hold him?" said Jerry Connors, taking Wildcat's pistol. "Now, you male manikin, crawl into that telephone railing alongside that girl! The first one of you that makes a move will get it!"

The uniformed floorman took one look into Jerry's blazing brown eyes and crouched beside the girl who had been knocked loose from the switchboard.

"When the coppers come, Jerry, send them up to Apartment K!" directed Wildcat.

There were two elevators. The second had just come to the ground floor. The white eyeballs of a colored boy rolled as he took in the scene in the lobby. Wildcat had no time to spare.

His second pistol was in his hand.

"Tenth floor!" he rapped out. "Then you'll drop this cage back to the first floor and wait, or you'll need an undertaker!"

"Yassah! Yassah!" stammered the operator.

Two minutes later, Wildcat Gordon again stood before the door of Apartment K. He judged the big boss and his men would just about be getting around to counting the money in the leather suitcase.

He pushed the button. The odd dental plates slipped into his mouth. As the big door opened the fracton of an inch, Wildcat was standing out of line well to one side.

The voice of The Whisperer could not be duplicated by any other person. Wildcat spoke in an eerie, chilling tone.

"I've found out something! I must see the big boss again!"

The door opened another few inches, enough for the butler-clad 'thug" inside to push his head out and look around. That was the last time for a long

while this aide to the big boss would stick out his neck.

The flat side of Wildcat's pistol crashed upon the man's skull and he fell into the half-opened door. Wildcat sprang inside. But the heavy voice that he had heard from behind a wall came suddenly from beyond the reception room.

"See what's happened, Rollers! That was The Whisperer again!"

Wildcat was not quick enough, being hampered by his wounded side, to reach the inner door ahead of the second aide. This big man in a butler's uniform was fast enough when it came to grasping a situation and acting.

"Ditch the dough, boss!" he shouted, a gun jumping into one hand. "It's Wildcat Gordon!"

Bullets ripped into the rug where Wildcat had been standing. The commissioner was forced to fall and roll. The lead nipped close to his head. The pseudo butler swore wildly and steadied his pistol for a finishing shot.

The automatic in Wildcat's hand gave forth a slow, deadly hissing. The other man fell down and tried desperately to prop up a shattered lower jaw with one hand. Wildcat crossed over his body.

THE shots were still echoing in the corridor outside when the elevator discharged eight rushing men. They were led by the wooden-faced Detective Sergeant Thorsen and another man, who was no less than Mayor Van Royston himself.

"Great heavens, this is terrible!" squawked Mayor Van Royston, his tall, silk hat bobbing.

The mayor had been summoned from a midnight party. When he had learned their destination, he had informed Sergeant Thorsen he was crazy, but that he would accompany him to see what fantastic order had been received.

The first thing Mayor Van Royston saw was the apparent butler with a bump on his skull lying in the doorway. It was worse as Sergeant Thorsen pushed inside the reception room. The other butler man was lying on the floor, his lower jaw at an odd angle and blood streaming over his white shirt front.

Sergeant Thorsen pushed over this man. Mayor Van Royston was mumbling to himself.

"Whatever crazy thing this is, we're finished—it ends the reform party—"

Mayor Van Royston finished off with, "Wildcat Gordon? You're alive! What insanity is this? You've finally done murder! You—Sergeant Thorsen, take his gun!"

Wildcat Gordon had slumped into a chair beside a wide table. The figure of the big boss of the truck rackets sat on the other side. The big boss was not moving, for Wildcat's hand was steadied on the edge of the table and his silenced pistol lay in an

undeviating line with the throat of the big boss.

"Yes, you'd better take his gun," stated the big boss calmly. "Mayor Van Royston, you thought your police commissioner was murdered. It seems he has only gone crazy. He broke in here just now, shot two of my men and held me up. Take his gun, Sergeant Thorsen."

A hard, mirthless laugh came from Wildcat Gordon.

"A bluffer to the last, huh? Suppose you tell the boys about that money on the table?"

Many wrapped packages of greenbacks had been spread out. The yawning door of a tall safe was in the wall back of the big boss. Undoubtedly he had been about to put the racket money in there.

Still the big boss kept his cold nerve.

"I have here, Mayor Van Royston," he said, "the money entrusted to me for payment on a corporation deal which must be made early tomorrow. I don't know what Wildcat Gordon is talking about."

Deputy Henry Bolton loomed in the doorway, his Adam's apple jumping up and down. Deputy Bolton was on a spot and he knew it, but he had to swallow his chagrin. The little, gray medical examiner was beside the deputy.

"Hell's fire, mayor!" exploded Henry Bolton. "Let me have a look at that money on the table!"

AT that, the big boss slid his hand under the table. It whipped out with a revolver in his fingers, but Sergeant Thorsen pulled and shot from his hip all in one motion. The arm of the big boss went queerly double and his revolver fell.

Mayor Van Royston gasped as Deputy Bolton himself started pulling packages of the greenbacks apart. The medical examiner was selecting bills with torn corners. He had a handful of the corners he had taken from his pocket.

"There you are," said the little, gray doctor. "That's one, and here's another. Yep. They'll probably all match."

"What does it mean—what—" Mayor Van Royston sputtered.

"You tell his honor, Henry," suggested Wildcat quietly.

"Them torn pieces come from a notebook in the

inside pocket of Dummy Blatz, or what was left of him," grudgingly admitted Deputy Bolton. "We just picked up his corpse in a tool box, and the doctor here found them torn bills. Then we got a message from Wildcat Gordon to come up here."

"That's right," stated Wildcat Gordon. "And The Whisperer delivered that money. He was to take over the rackets on the other side of the State line. I missed getting The Whisperer as he left here, and he managed to crease me a couple of times. Now suppose you have a look in the big safe, Sergeant Thorsen."

Sergeant Thorsen pulled out a tinkling bag. Marvelous looking diamonds and emeralds poured onto the polished top of the table.

"The Morganston stuff!" gasped Mayor Van Royston.

"Right!" snapped Wildcat Gordon. "Just another angle of the way you were played for a sucker! The Morganston jewels! And now I am afraid, Mayor Van Royston, you'll have to find some other legal advice when it comes to prosecuting me for activities over the State line!"

Mayor Van Royston looked sadly at the dignified, impressive Attorney Homer J. Pearsall, and swallowed hard. It was hard to believe he was seeing the big boss of the racket that netted half a million a month—the crook who had engineered the Morganston jewel theft and made a monkey out of Deputy Henry Bolton.

"Why, damn it!" Mayor Van Royston suddenly exploded. "He made a monkey out of me, too!"

Wildcat Gordon grinned. He was looking at the redheaded Jerry Connors. The smart girl had her eyes directly upon him. Their brown depths reflected some possible secret belief. She was looking at the dried, red stain along Wildcat Gordon's ribs.

"And Dunk Smith got away?" she said, in a low tone that only Wildcat Gordon could hear. "Well, I'm glad, Commissioner Gordon."

Wildcat said, "Jerry, you're going home with me. There is a girl living at our place I want you to meet. Now tonight she will have hot coffee waiting. You and Tiny will like each other, Jerry."

Wildcat's grin was broader than ever.

THE END

CHAPTER I
THE SWAMI'S PROPHECY

The Iris Theater, pride of Border City, was packed to the doors, with hundreds of people thronging the streets, listening to the voice that carried through big amplifiers. Half the population of the Texas town had shown up to witness, or hear, the final performance of Swami Zoram, the celebrated mind reader.

There was another celebrity present—Norgil the Magician. He was in the audience, and his present claim to distinction was the fact that he had managed to get himself into the theater, along with his leading lady, Miriam Laymond. Yet the credit for that feat rightfully belonged to Swami Zoram.

Norgil and Miriam had been admitted only because the magician carried a special pass for two, which Swami Zoram had sent him the day before.

Swami Zoram claimed to be a master of the Orient. He had, at least, borrowed plentifully from the East. He wore a Hindu costume, with a garish turban; his stage set had a pair of Chinese Buddhas, seated on taborets; while the backdrop represented the Egyptian Sphinx. But the hodgepodge did not disturb the audience.

They were interested solely in the bearded swami, as he stalked the stage, gazing into a crystal ball, and turning his glittering eyes upon the audience. People were whispering questions to a girl in Japanese costume, and Swami Zoram was getting the answers from the crystal ball.

The swami termed the girl his "Psychic Eye," and only two members of the audience knew that her simple requests for answers supplied Swami Zoram with the actual questions. The two who knew were Norgil and Miriam; they talked about it, when they left the theater, after the show.

"I don't know which is more marvelous," declared Norgil. "The way Swami Zoram sells that old code act, or the way the audience fell for the hokum."

"Calling the numbers on dollar bills was good," conceded Miriam. "He read them as fast as the girl gave them."

"Which is quite usual," returned Norgil. "The dollar bill stunt has more whiskers on it than the swami's phony beard."

Mention of the false beard surprised Miriam. She had supposed that the swami's crop was real. But Norgil had known the swami long ago, before he had adopted the name of Zoram. Therefore, Miriam reasoned, Norgil ought to know about the whiskers, too.

They waited in the lobby of the Border City Hotel until Swami Zoram arrived and strode pompously through. The swami had changed to street clothes, but he still had his brown, spade-shaped beard, and it looked very real to Miriam. At

the desk Norgil bought a copy of a local newspaper then inquired the number of the swami's room. He motioned to Miriam and they went upstairs.

Outside the swami's room Norgil paused, his hand half-lifted to knock. He and Miriam heard the smooth, oily tone of Swami Zoram on the telephone.

"Twenty-five grand?" The words carried a sneer. "Not a chance... I said fifty, and it stands... Get this. By the end of next week, it will be a hundred... Yes, you'll find out why—"

The receiver *clicked*. The swami gave a low, knowing chuckle, the sort that he used on stage, when he answered difficult questions. Outside the door, Miriam looked at Norgil; her eyes were really wide. The magician gestured for silence; waited a half minute before he knocked at the door.

Swami Zoram received them with a long, enthusiastic laugh, indicating that he regarded Norgil as an old friend. Finishing a hearty handshake, the fake Hindu tugged away his false beard, and tossed it on a table. Miriam studied a sallow, roundish face, that had every mark of shrewdness.

"I want to talk to you about next week," declared Swami Zoram, glibly. "I hear you're opening at the Orpheus Theater, in New Orleans."

Norgil nodded.

"I've booked into the Apollo," continued Zoram. "It's right next door to the Orpheus. I've got a favor to ask you—"

"I understand," inserted Norgil, his own tone a suave purr. "You want me to lay off, and not expose you as a faker. That's up to you, Zoram. If you do a straight act, purely for entertainment, I won't bother you.

"But if you pull off phony stuff, like this"—Norgil was tapping the Border City newspaper—"I'll challenge you to prove it. That's final, Zoram."

Swami Zoram took the newspaper, glanced at the headlines, and laughed. The newspaper carried a picture of the swami, with his prediction that Border City would be shaken by a great explosion in the dead of night. The swami hadn't given the precise date, but he had prophesied that the blast would occur within a fortnight.

"Just a publicity stunt," said Zoram. "I learned that nitro trucks are being routed past Border City, to the oil fields. They go through at three in the morning. Sooner or later, one will blow up, close enough to wake everybody in town. When that happens"—he tapped his chest with his thumb—"people will remember that Swami Zoram predicted it."

"Very cute," acquiesced Norgil, "but lay off that sort of hokum in New Orleans."

"That's understood," agreed Zoram. His tone, for once, was frank. "But that wasn't the favor I wanted to ask. My Psychic Eye has quit. She's taking a train to the coast tonight. I've got to get another girl; that's why I wanted you to see the show tonight."

Zoram looked at Miriam as he spoke, and his meaning was quite plain. He knew that Norgil had performed the mental act in legitimate style, with Miriam as assistant. With Norgil playing in the next door theater to Zoram's, it seemed reasonable that the magician might lend him Miriam, to work in the act.

Particularly reasonable, since Miriam herself would be able to check on Zoram's act and make sure that he did not deal in phony predictions, or encourage theater patrons to visit him for worthless private readings at five dollars apiece.

In pressing his request, Zorarm produced some typewritten sheets that contained all the code methods used in his act. He was quite sure that Miriam could learn the whole system within the next few days. Zoram's plea was genuine enough; he was really on a spot and needed help. But Norgil decided to reserve decision.

"We'll talk it over," said the magician. "Give me a call when you get to New Orleans, Zoram."

Downstairs, Norgil and Miriam had a late supper in the coffee shop. It was midnight when they started their moonlight drive to New Orleans; a trip of some three hundred miles. Norgil settled on a fifty-mile-an-hour pace, to get them there by dawn. But fifty seemed a creep compared to the speed of the car that whizzed past them near the outskirts of Border City.

The speeding car was a sleek coupé that formed a glittery streak in the moonlight as it shot across the brow of a hill ahead. Norgil calculated that it was doing better than seventy, but he didn't criticize the driver. On a clear road, a high speed seemed safe enough for anyone who preferred it.

Norgil liked fifty, because he could chat while he drove, and he had an important subject on his mind.

"It's easy to guess why the girl quit," he told Miriam. "Zoram is mixed in some racket, and she wanted to get clear. That talk of his fifty thousand dollars or double was the real tipoff. I'd like to know what's in back of it."

"If I worked in Zoram's act," began Miriam, "I might—"

"You might run into trouble," inserted Norgil. "I wouldn't want you to take the risk, Miriam; not unless we were out to solve something very big. As big a crime as murder—"

Miriam's hand grabbed Norgil's wrist—so forcibly that she jarred the wheel. The girl was pointing from her window; but she couldn't find words to tell what she saw. Norgil took the whole thing in with a glance.

They were at the brow of the hill. Ahead, the road dipped, weaving an irregular course beneath the moonlight. A mile away it twisted upward, to the left, to begin a sharp right curve around a blunt hillside. The speeding coupé was a pygmy object, driving rapidly for the bend. Its driver couldn't see the obstacle that Miriam and Norgil observed from their hilltop.

A large, oddly-shaped truck had poked across the road, covering both lanes at the sharpest section of the curve. A midnight tragedy was in the making, and there was no way to warn the driver of the coupé. Before Miriam could close her horrified eyes, she felt Norgil's steadying grip. The coupé had taken the curve.

They saw the car lurch into a spin, then skew toward the stalled truck like a chunk of iron drawn by a magnet. Miriam expected the coupé to crunch into a twist of wreckage, but it didn't. Instead, the car and the truck vanished—so suddenly that it reminded Miriam of one of Norgil's stage tricks.

Then the whole countryside thundered with a blast that ricocheted in deafening waves from the slopes. The ground quivered as though rocked by an earthquake. The very road seemed to contort itself as Norgil brought his own car to a stop.

The sleek coupé had struck a nitroglycerin truck, abolishing both vehicles in the twinkling of an eye. The roars from that tragic blast were carrying back to Border City, as proof that the prophecy of Swami Zoram had been fulfilled!

CHAPTER II
THE PSYCHIC EYE

Miriam Laymond sat by her hotel window, staring out over New Orleans. The low buildings of the level city were a blur before her gaze. Her eyes were fixed on the broad bend of the brown-hued Mississippi, beyond the high-built levee. It helped her concentrate as she repeated the code words needed in the swami's act.

With a shake of her head, Miriam came from her half-trance. She rubbed her forehead, and laid aside the sheets of paper. She had memorized the system well enough; further effort might confuse what she had learned. This was the day that Zoram's show opened; the afternoon was well along, and there would just be time for dinner before the evening performance.

Miriam tried to think of other things. She remembered that night in Border City, the last time she had seen Swami Zoram. Despite herself, she visualized the scene on the highway, the vanishing of the truck and the coupé. Somehow, the aftermath had seemed worse than the actual tragedy.

Norgil and Miriam had been the only witness of the explosion; but other people had come along to help them search the ground. They hadn't found a trace of vehicles or victims; not even a fragment of a license plate to identify the driver of the coupé.

That was the way when a nitro truck exploded; though Miriam wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen the evidence—or lack of it. A dollar a mile, they paid the drivers, with a passport to oblivion every time a cargo set out. But this blast had been

different. Maybe the driver had fled his truck and decided to remain unlocated, after the coupé hit it.

The authorities were still investigating the case. So far, they had found a fragment of a hub cap and the knob of a gearshift lever, on a hillside half a mile from the scene. A rather slow rate of assembly, but they were keeping at it.

No one had linked Zoram with the tragedy. The swami's prophecy hadn't impressed the law. Had the explosion occurred while Zoram was still in Border City, enabling the swami to do bigger business as a result of his prediction, there might have been some questions. But Zoram hadn't capitalized on his publicity.

Norgil, alone, saw deeper into the game. He knew facts about Swami Zoram that others didn't. Which explained why Norgil had decided to let Miriam work in the mind reader's act.

New Orleans was agleam when Miriam finished dinner. Walking along Canal Street, the city's broad and brilliant main thoroughfare, Miriam turned into a side street and reached the Thespian Arcade, a relic of old New Orleans. The arcade was the entrance to a patio where two theaters were located—the Apollo and the Orpheus.

The twin playhouses formed an intriguing sight. On the left of the wide patio was the lobby of the Apollo, where bombastic showbills and garish lithographs heralded the engagement of Swami Zoram, the sensation of the Orient, who could see all, tell all.

On the right, the lobby of the Orpheus Theater presented a conservative display. Norgil, the celebrated magician, was billed with a feature picture, and the lobby frames held tasteful photographs showing the various illusions that made up the magic act. Miriam entered the Orpheus and went backstage. She wanted to talk with Norgil before she saw Swami Zoram.

Norgil had just finished the supper show. Miriam found him in his dressing room. Greeting her with a smile, Norgil pointed across a tiny courtyard to a lighted window on the other side. Miriam could see the outline of a big trunk against the frosted pane.

"The swami's dressing room," announced Norgil. "His nibs just showed up. Left a message with the doorman here at the Orpheus"—Norgil drew a sheet of paper from an envelope—"reminding me that he's counting on you. How about the homework? Did you learn it?"

Smiling, Miriam nodded. She handed Norgil the code sheets and let him check the key words that she repeated.

"Good enough," decided Norgil. "Good enough for Zoram, anyway. His act is mostly hokum. He's doing an hour and a half, and you'll only have to work at intervals."

"What will he fill in with?"

"He's rigged a crystal act," replied Norgil, "with a couple of local boys, made up as Hindus, to swipe written questions from the audience. He's doing a hyp stunt, too, using horses, mostly. Terrible, but the public eats it."

"You'll catch the show?"

"Part of it," decided Norgil. "I'm going out to dinner first. I'll have to leave, though, before Zoram finishes, because our last show starts just after he winds up."

Leaving the rear of the Orpheus Theater, Miriam entered the stage door of the Apollo, and found her dressing room. She found a trig Japanese costume awaiting her, and after she had finished with her makeup, no one would have known her. Yellowish greasepaint, a Number Sixteen, produced the proper complexion, while strips of transparent tape, drawn outward, enabled Miriam to give her eyes an almond shape.

Miriam was stepping to the stage when she saw an usher knock at the door of Zoram's dressing room. The swami poked his bearded face in sight; he was wearing his jeweled turban above it. The usher handed him an envelope, with the comment: "From Mr. Clarry."

"Who is Mr. Clarry?" queried Zoram in a smooth tone, which made Miriam decide that the swami already knew who Clarry was. "Why should he send me a message?"

"He's the new man handling the box office," replied the usher. "He said to give you the envelope; that's all I know."

With the usher gone, Miriam approached Zoram's door. It was slightly ajar, for it had failed to latch when Zoram closed it. Through the crack, the girl saw the bearded swami at his dressing table eagerly opening the envelope.

It held a sheet of paper with long rows of figures which Zoram checked by key numbers that accompanied them, after reading a note that came with the sheet. Turning to a small pedestal that held a crystal ball, Zoram drew back a slide in the base and began to copy the line of figures on a roll of paper that moved along when his thumb manipulated a tiny cog wheel in the pedestal.

Miriam was on stage when Zoram arrived there. The swami's eyes showed a pleased gleam when he viewed the attractive assistant who was to serve as his Psychic Eye. He checked the code with Miriam and gave a satisfied nod.

"Excellent," decided Zoram. "I take five minutes for my opening spiel. When I polish the crystal, it's your cue to enter."

The curtain rose. For half a minute, Miriam stood at the wing, watching the swami and the two imitation Hindus who flanked him, looking very uncomfortable in their ill-fitting Oriental costumes. Then, while Swami Zoram was droning to the

audience, promising that he would actually see all and tell it, Miriam acted on impulse.

She glided back to the swami's dressing room. In the wastebasket, she found the crumpled sheet that bore the rows of figures and the key numbers. Promptly, Miriam recognized what they signified.

The long rows were the serial numbers of five- and ten-dollar bills; the keys that went with them represented the location of theater seats. Dropping the list back in the wastebasket. Miriam spread the note that she found.

It read:

> Here are the numbers of the phonies. Twenty-five ought to be enough tonight. Don't forget to sprinkle them, like you said. Some of the boys are in the audience. Clarry
>
> PS: Just planted a couple more. Seat J 3: F800748162A; H 22: F263631992A.

Crumpled tight in Miriam's palm, Clarry's note seemed to carry a burning tingle. Just what it meant the girl couldn't quite decide; but the whole thing spelled danger. So did the voice of Swami Zoram, which was reaching a high, excited pitch, as Miriam heard it from the stage. Chucking the note, Miriam hurried from the dresssing room. She reached the wing just as Zoram began to polish the crystal ball.

Mechanically, Miriam stepped on stage. She found herself going down the steps, into the audience. People were handing her objects, she was asking the swami to name them. Her mind was back in the hotel room. She could visualize the muggy river, off beyond her window. She was using the right words; for Zoram called everything.

"A pencil... a watch—" The monotony of Zoram's drone almost maddened Miriam. "A coin; a half dollar. Its date is 1909—"

Miriam received a dollar bill. When she asked Zoram what it was, he named the denomination. She called for the serial number; he gave four figures, then the rest, after Miriam insisted that he concentrate.

The stunt scored an instant hit. Wherever Miriam turned, money was shoved toward her. Seated on his throne, Zoram gazed into the crystal and kept on naming bills and numbers. Finishing with a five-dollar bill that a lady handed Miriam, Zoram added, crisply:

"Wait!"

Miriam saw a motion of the swami's thumb. His eyes glistened as he raised them. Looking straight toward the lady who owned the five-dollar bill, Zoram spoke, emphatically:

"I see more, through the aid of my Psychic Eye. That bill is worthless, madam. Take it to your bank, tomorrow, and say that I declared it to be counterfeit. Prove for yourself that Swami Zoram sees all —and tells!"

CHAPTER III
DEATH RIDES ANEW

A buzz swept through the audience; so sharp, that the atmosphere seemed to tingle with an electric charge. Miriam could hear a crackle; it came from currency that people were thrusting back into their pockets.

Then Zoram's oily tone:

"Anymore bills? Let me view them through my Psychic Eye, enlarge them with the magnifying power of the crystal. Skeptics have offered thousands of dollars, hoping to prove that I can be wrong. You can make the test for a mere five dollars."

The challenge brought response. More bills were coming Miriam's way. With each, Zoram paused dramatically after he had named the serial number; then announced whether the bill was genuine or not.

Bigger bills were being tendered. Zoram detected a few spurious tens. To Miriam, the act became an ordeal. She was actually in the audience; could feel the tenseness all about her. Some people, those who had put their money away, were drawing back when she approached, as though they feared evil from the Psychic Eye.

Abruptly, Swami Zoram arose from his throne; he had decided that the game had gone far enough. The imitation Hindus began to pass pads and envelopes among the audience so that Zoram could answer written questions. Gratefully, Miriam ascended the steps and went off stage.

She wanted to talk to Norgil, but knew that she would have to wait. At any moment, Zoram might call for his Psychic Eye, and Miriam could be in the act again. In fact, Zoram did summon her; she was on stage and off, all during the show, even while he, the swami, performed his hypnotic act with the assistance of stupid-looking confederates who came from the audience; the men that Norgil had termed "horses."

When the show was over, Miriam hurriedly discarded her Japanese costume and disposed of her makeup. She was grateful to be back in her own clothes and anxious to report to Norgil. She thought it good policy, though, to speak to Zoram before she left.

Still wearing his swami's regalia, Zoram chuckled when he saw Miriam. He congratulated her on the excellent assistance that she had given; then, in dry tone, he remarked:

"That hokum about the counterfeit money fetched them. It's the stuff that makes people talk. We'll have a packed house tomorrow night."

Miriam's eyes narrowed.

"You mean that those bills weren't counterfeit?"

"How should I know?" asked Zoram, with a shrug. "I didn't see them, did I? I know human nature; nobody likes to get stuck with counterfeit cash. None of those saps will go near a bank to find out whether I was right or wrong."

Leaving, Miriam closed Zoram's door. As before, it failed to latch. But she had no advantage in the fact, until she was halfway to the stage door. Then she heard the ringing of a telephone bell. Remembering that there was a phone in Zoram's dressing room, Miriam tiptoed back to the starred door.

She saw Zoram, his hand lifting from the wastebasket, where he had reclaimed Clarry's note, and the list of counterfeit bills. He reached for the telephone, and spoke; then, Miriam heard him chuckle.

"Thirty grand, eh?" queried Zoram. "A better offer. Still, it's not enough... Fifty grand was the price... So you're not worried? Funny that you raised the ante, if you weren't... Better call me up tomorrow night. See how you feel about it"—Zoram's rolled tone changed to a sneer—"after I've staged the same kind of show that I put on tonight."

Miriam was on her way when the telephone receiver *clicked.* She heard Zoram's door jar tightly in place; the key turn in the lock. Reaching the other theater, she knocked at the door of Norgil's dressing room. The sound of the magician's cheery voice was such a contrast to Zoram's ominous tone that Miriam gave a sigh of happy relief.

Norgil was dressing for the show. He came from his dressing room a few minutes later sliding his arms into a stiff shirt. Miriam motioned him back into the dressing room; began to tie his white necktie for him. Knowing that Norgil would warn her if anyone approached, she whispered the details of all that had happened in the Apollo Theater. Norgil grimaced.

"I should have caught Zoram's show," he undertoned. "But I fell for one of those nine-course dinners at Gallion's Cafe. Oysters Rockfeller, trout Marguery"—Norgil shook his head, at recollection of the repast. "But we'll have a dinner like it, Miriam, after we settle this Zoram mess."

"You think it really is a mess?"

"No doubt about it, Miriam. Those bills were counterfeit; otherwise that chap Clarry wouldn't have sent the note and list to Zoram. Clarry must have planted the bad bills in the change he gave people at the box office, and he checked the serials with the numbers of the seats he sold them."

"But what can the game be?"

"We'll talk about that"—Norgil was reaching for his coat and vest, as the overture commenced—"after I've finished my own show."

Miriam went out into the theater. It seemed odd to be watching Norgil's show from the front of the house. With other matters preying on her mind, she gained a sudden resolve. Going out through the lobby of the Orpheus Theater, Miriam chose an obscure bench across the patio and gained a slanted view of the Apollo lobby next door.

She could see the window of the box office; a wise-faced man behind it. The fellow was evidently Clarry; Miriam watched him open the window, and

snap his fingers. An usher arrived; Clarry gave him a metal box.

"Take this up to the manager's office," ordered Clarry, in a harsh monotone. "I'm leaving for the night."

Producing a derby hat, Clarry stalked toward the arcade, not noticing Miriam. Clarry's eyes had suddenly fixed on two loungers, farther along the arcade. They galvanized as he approached; separating, each gripped one of Clarry's elbows.

They weren't quite out of Miriam's sight, especially when Clarry drew back. As the pair restrained Clarry, the fellow lost his wise air. Miriam heard him stammer:

"Who... who are you?"

"Just a couple of friends," returned one. "We're going places; thought you'd like to come along."

"You ought to remember us," put in the other. "We used to play at your table when you were dealing faro over at the Club Scimitar."

Catching a glimpse of Clarry's turning face, Miriam saw the fellow suppress his nervous look. His "friends" paraded him out through the arcade to a waiting touring car, where two men were in the front seat. Suddenly shoved into the rear, Clarry made a sudden break, only to be suppressed. As the car shot away, the man beside the driver reached back and gave a poke at Clarry.

Miriam heard a sound that could have been a backfire of the motor. There was a shriek of brakes; then rapid footsteps on the sidewalk. One of the chunky men came into sight; stooped to pick up something that had fallen into the gutter. Peering past the corner of the arcade, Miriam saw the object as the fellow hurried back to the touring car. The thing was Clarry's derby hat.

His show over, Norgil heard Miriam's tale of tragedy. He nodded agreement with her theory that death had ridden anew, with Clarry as the victim. He was particularly interested when he learned that one of Clarry's captors had mentioned the Club Scimitar.

"Quite a spot," remarked Norgil. "The Club Scimitar is the only gambling house in New Orleans that's running wide open. It's run by a fellow named Rick Althorp, and he's invited me over there. Let's go, Miriam."

When they reached the Club Scimitar, Norgil was greeted by a tall, long-faced man, whose darkish lips held a perpetual smile. He was Rick Althorp, the proprietor, and he bowed to Miriam when he learned that she was a Member of Norgil's company. Rick suggested that they try their luck at roulette; soon, Miriam was forgetting past troubles as she watched the fascinating gyrations of the bouncing ball.

Norgil was more interested in the other players. Luck was good tonight; everyone seemed to have a share in it. Occasionally, players had to buy more chips, but they eventually cashed in as winners.

Such was true with Norgil and Miriam. Though they had not played for high stakes, they found their initial investment nearly doubled when they cashed in their chips.

They stopped at the door to say good night to Rick Althorp. The gambler was chatting with a square-shouldered man who turned out to be a police officer in plainclothes. Althorp introduced him as Lieutenant Carpenter; then, in a tone so suave that it seemed the vocal embodiment of his permanent smile, the gambler spoke to the police lieutenant.

"Sorry to hear about Clarry," said Althorp. "I was afraid he'd get killed in one of those dives along the riverfront."

"Why did he go down there?" queried Carpenter.

"For supplies," returned Althorp. "He could buy dope cheaper from the fellows who peddled it off the boats."

"How long had he been a drug addict?"

"I don't know. I found it out a month ago and had to let him go. A hophead won't do as a faro dealer. I suppose he picked up a job somewhere, because I hadn't seen him lately."

Norgil had very little to say while he and Miriam rode along Canal Street in their cab. It was when they reached the girl's hotel that the magician made a speculative remark, just before he said good night.

"I wonder," said Norgil, "how Swami Zoram is going to handle his act tomorrow night."

CHAPTER IV
NORGIL'S CHALLENGE

There was no envelope from the box office the next evening, but Swami Zoram did not seem worried by its absence. Just before curtain time, the bearded faker drew Miriam aside.

"The house is packed," he told her, "all on account of that counterfeit money gag. I'm going to work it stronger tonight, but I don't want to ruin it. So remember, every time they give you a new bill, shift it to your left hand. Keep old ones in your right."

People were producing money from the moment that Miriam went down the steps into the audience. The newspapers had not mentioned Zoram's ability to detect counterfeit money by psychic power, but evidently the news had traveled by word of mouth. The audience expected Zoram to repeat the stunt, and he did not fail them.

Miriam noted that the bills he classed as counterfeits were all fives or tens, and new ones. Sheer bluff, of course, but it worked. Miriam noted certain men in the audience who conferred with companions before pocketing their money. In some cases they wrote down the numbers of the bills.

After the show, Zoram received another phone call that Miriam overheard. Someone was offering to settle for forty thousand, but the swami rejected

the bid. Fifty grand was still his price, and tomorrow it might be doubled. Miriam carried the news to Norgil. From his dressing room, the magician stared across to Zoram's lighted window, then glanced at his watch.

"Just time enough before the act," he decided. "I'm going to give that fake a jolt. Come on, Miriam."

There was no telephone in Norgil's dressing room, so he used a pay station in the lobby. He called the theater next door, and asked for Swami Zoram. Miriam could hear Norgil's voice, through the door of the telephone booth.

"When I said no funny business," declared Norgil, "I meant it, Zoram. Don't try to alibi yourself. Miriam tells me you're faking that stuff about the counterfeit bills... Legitimate? Maybe you call it that, but I don't... You won't quit? All right, Zoram, whatever happens, you've asked for it."

Stepping from the phone booth, Norgil paused before going backstage. He told Miriam to call all the newspapers, and ask that each send a representative to meet him at his hotel immediately after the last show.

There were headlines the next morning. Norgil had challenged Zoram to prove himself a mind reader under test conditions. The plan was simple. Norgil was to provide a large, soundproof box, and a committee was to lock Zoram inside it, with his crystal ball, a flashlight, a pad of paper, and a pencil.

Questions were to be written by the committee before Zoram was in the box. The swami could stay inside as long as he wanted; but when he rapped, the committeemen would open a slide from the outside. It would then be Zoram's turn to push out sheets of paper, bearing answers to the questions. If they tallied, Norgil would concede that Zoram was a genuine mind reader.

At noon, Norgil called in the newspapermen and told them that he had heard from Zoram. The swami was willing to undertake the test, provided that it was held in his own theater, with the stage blacked out and the committee stationed among the audience. There was another proviso. Zoram was willing to forfeit five thousand dollars, if he failed; but, should he succeed, he would expect Norgil to hand over that amount of money.

"I'll take him up on it," affirmed Norgil. "We'll hold the test tonight, if I can be ready that soon."

"What's holding you up?" inquired a reporter. "Won't you have time to build the box?"

"I'll have the box," assured Norgil grimly. "What I need is time to raise the five thousand dollars."

Half an hour later, Norgil was chatting with Rick Althorp in a little office at the rear of the Club Scimitar. The smiling gambler opened a safe when he heard the reason for the magician's visit.

"Here is the five thousand, Norgil," declared Rick. "Your proposition of ten percent sounds good to

me, provided"—the gambler's eyes were sharp—"that you're sure Zoram can't win."

"How can he?" argued Norgil. "The box will be soundproof, and the committee will have the key."

"Suppose he has some radio gimmick—"

"It won't do him any good. The questions will be written, not spoken. I've chosen the committeemen! Zoram can't bribe them."

Rick began to stroke his chin; he was very nearly convinced that Norgil was right. Leaning across the desk, the magician met the final objection before Rick could present it.

"Blacking out the stage won't help Zoram," declared Norgil. "Maybe he thinks he can get out of the box, and sneak down into the audience. But not with my box. I know the methods of escape artists too well to allow any loophole."

"But other persons could approach the box—"

"And open it? Not a chance. The lock will be sealed, just in case. The only thing that Zoram's pals might do"— Norgil chuckled at the thought—"is sneak the box off stage in the dark, and take it away on a truck. It would be a nice way for Zoram to get out of town, and save what he calls his reputation."

Joining in the laugh, Rick handed Norgil the bundle of money and clapped the magician on the shoulder. Norgil signed a promissory note for forty-five hundred dollars and hurried back to his hotel to confer with the committee.

Again, as on the previous evening, Swami Zoram performed before a full house. Assisted by his Psychic Eye, he repeated his detection of counterfeit money in the audience, but no one was greatly interested. The whole audience was looking forward to the box test that was to follow the shortened regular show.

Quite incognito in her Japanese costume, Miriam stationed herself in a side aisle of the theater, when a curtain rose to disclose the soundproof box that Norgil had sent to Zoram's theater. Norgil had told Miriam to watch the test from the audience, as he would be getting ready for his own act, next door.

Swami Zoram was in his most sneery mood. He studied the square, light-built box that he was to enter, gave his crystal ball a twirl, and seated himself within the wooden prison.The committeemen handed him a flashlight, pad and pencil. Receiving those items, Zoram tucked them in the sash of his garish robe. He was stroking his beard and gazing fixedly at the crystal ball when the committee closed the door of the box, locked it, and affixed the seal.

As soon as the committee reached the front row of the audience, the whole stage went pitch-black. House lights dimmed, producing a spooky effect that brought murmurs from the audience. Set deep on the stage, the locked box was completely lost from sight in the solid darkness that the audience faced. The silence was absolute, while the committee members wrote their questions.

Everyone was straining, expecting to hear the raps which would announce that Zoram had gained the answers. Somehow, the swami's confidence had made persons doubt the strength of Norgil's challenge. Even Miriam was disturbed by the thought that Zoram might possess a core of genuine mind reading ability, deep within the inflated fakery that he usually employed.

Men were straining from side seats near the aisle. Hearing them, Miriam glanced in their direction. As they sidled into darkness, she recognized faces that she had seen before. These were the men who had taken Clarry on that one-way ride to the waterfront!

They were sneaking toward the connecting door that led backstage. Miriam hesitated, remembering Norgil's admonition to remain in the audience. But Norgil had not specified that Miriam should ignore an emergency. When the assassins had disappeared into the darkness, the girl followed.

It was black backstage, but Miriam could hear whispers in the darkness; then, sounds that were unmistakable, though they were not loud enough to reach the audience. Miriam, alone of the hundreds in the theater, knew what was happening on the stage.

The same men who had gotten rid of Clarry were taking the sealed box; carrying it, with Zoram inside it, out through the stage door! Whatever Zoram's shortcomings, Miriam could not let him be taken to certain doom. There was only one person who could save the swami from his scheduled fate. That man was Norgil!

Miriam heard the stage door slide gently shut. Reaching it, she pressed the door open wide enough to wedge out through. She could see the big box being loaded on a truck in the rear alley. Only a hundred feet away was the light about the stage entrance to Norgil's theater, shining like a welcoming beacon.

Miriam started toward the light. The clatter of her wooden-soled sandals betrayed her. She heard a harsh voice:

"It's the Jap dame! Grab her—"

There wasn't time to struggle; not even time to shriek. Brawny hands were gripping Miriam, others were stifling her cries. Wilting under the overwhelming attack, the girl was dragged on board the truck, bound for the same destination as Swami Zoram!

CHAPTER V
THE DOUBLE GAME

Business was good at the Club Scimitar, where Rick Althorp, the smiling proprietor, seemed as genial as ever. Chips were rattling merrily at roulette and faro tables, where croupiers and dealers were working in stolid-faced style. But there were glances passed among the personnel that reached Rick Althorp.

No one, Rick included, liked the looks of certain customers who were on hand tonight. There were too many strangers who were difficult to analyze.

Strolling toward his office, Rick gave a signal to one of his assistant managers. The fellow followed him into the little office; gave a darty glance, before closing the door. Rick was behind his desk, when the assistant faced him.

"Well?" queried Rick. "What do you make of it, Markin?"

"They don't belong in town," replied Markin. "They might, if it was carnival time."

"But it isn't," inserted Rick. "Where do you think this bunch has come from?"

"Maybe they're down from Baton Rouge—"

"Or Washington."

Markin's half-hopeful expression became a scared one. Rick remained unperturbed. His laugh was genuine.

"Don't worry," he told Markin. "We aren't shoving the queer tonight. It was a good racket while it lasted, but I was ready to shut up shop, anyway."

Markin nodded. He knew that the Club Scimitar was operating because of a loophole in the law. Neither the city officials of New Orleans, nor the state authorities in Baton Rouge, would be able to close the gambling house for another week.

"With the joint wide open," chuckled Rick, "nobody suspects that I'm keeping something undercover. They forget that the Club Scimitar wasn't always legal; that it might have been a swell place to stow the gambling equipment, in a pinch.

"That's why they don't know the double game. They know I'm giving the customers a good play for their cash, but they haven't guessed that I'm paying out more money than I take in. But not the same money, Markin."

There was a grin from Markin. He understood. Rick's confidence was putting him more at ease.

"One man got wise," added Rick. "I'm going to have a talk with him, Markin. You stay here, while I'm gone."

Rick pulled out the slides above the drawers of the desk. The engaging of well-oiled catches was too slight for ears to hear. Rick tilted the desk forward; the floor came up with it, on hinges, showing a space beneath. Unless the catches were in place, that desk could be rolled about, showing an apparently solid floor beneath.

Descending steep steps, Rick drew the desk down after him. A light guided him from below. Rick stepped into an underground room, where a door marked the route to a secret passage. Men were awaiting him, four of them, but Rick was more interested in the cargo that they had brought.

A large, square box stood between two tables that bore printing presses. The box was locked and sealed. Rick knew that it was soundproof, but he

could hear raps coming from it. The raps were produced by a special hammer device, operating between the outside wall of the box and its soundproof lining.The prisoner in the box was tugging the cord that enabled him to signal the outside listeners.

Beyond the box, Rick saw a Japanese girl slumped upon an improvised couch formed by bundles of counterfeit money. The men who had brought the box explained why they had carried the girl along, too. Rick gave an approving nod; then pointed to the box.

"Pry it open."

The door of the box gave under the pressure of jimmies. Probing inside, Rick's huskies hauled out the robed figure of Swami Zoram. The bearded faker sank gasping to the floor, his air supply had evidently been getting short.

"You knew a lot, Zoram," spoke Rick, suavely, "so we thought you ought to know some more. Take a look around and see the factory where we turn out the phony mazuma."

Swami Zoram tried to look around. The effort was too much. His eyes rolled feebly; he sank back, huddling pitifully against the box.

"You were lucky, Zoram," declared Rick. "Too lucky. When you made that fool prediction in Border City, we tried to get you, using your own idea, an explosion. But it didn't happen to be your car that ran into the truck we planted.

"You knew you'd be safe when you reached New Orleans. You were too close for us to touch you. Maybe you thought Clarry would be safe, too, because we trusted him enough to let him spy on you. But that stunt of calling the counterfeit bills was a little too strong. We figured that Clarry had tipped you off

to the racket and we had a way to get rid of him."

From her temporary couch, Miriam saw Zoram try to rise. His beard was wagging as he tried to say something, but his lips were not equal to the task. He sank back, his fingers plucking feebly at the sash of his Hindu costume.

"We couldn't take a risk with you, Zoram," completed Rick, "unless we found a way to pin it on someone else. It was Norgil who gave us the chance we wanted. When they find that you've left the theater, box and all, they'll figure the challenge was the reason.

"Norgil will get the blame first, and he'll slap it back on us. They'll say he got rid of you to save five thousand bucks. He'll say you had yourself removed from the picture for the very same reason. But nobody will be asking me what became of Swami Zoram."

Stooping, Rick grabbed the weary swami by the shoulders, yanked him to his feet, and shoved him back against the box. As Zoram started to sag, Rick caught him in the most convenient method—by the beard. The false whiskers stretched under the strain. Rick's imitation smile became real.

"Phonies!" ejaculated Rick. "We'll take a look at the mug behind them, before we give you and the Jap dame tickets for a ride like Clarry took!"

With a wrench, Rick yanked the beard from Zoram's face. He might have imagined any sort of countenance behind it; any, except the one that he actually viewed. Rick's lips lost their smile completely as he uttered the name that Miriam, at the same moment, was trying to repress.

"Norgil!"

IN the borrowed robes of Zoram, Norgil had become a dynamo of action. He wasn't groggy, as he had pretended; he was very much alive. His hand had whisked from the sash before Rick uttered his name. It brought a revolver with it, and Norgil was shooting as he sprang aside.

Rick and his astonished pals dived for the shelter of tables and presses, some sprawling, as Norgil clipped them with shots to hips and shoulders. Completely tricked by the man who had feigned weakness, along with false identity, they hadn't time to draw their own guns and stop him.

Grabbing Miriam with his free arm, Norgil swept the bewildered girl to the doorway of the passage; put the barrier between them and the opposition just as Rick and an unwounded pal began to open fire. Realizing that Norgil blocked escape by underground, Rick yelled for his toady to stave off a counterthrust. Leaping for the steep stairs, Rick tried to reach his office.

Again, the move was a belated one. Rick hadn't expected battle from Zoram, the shakedown artist who had tried to dicker. In supplying gunfire, Norgil had done more than the opposition. He had

sounded a general alarm. Men came piling down the steps to smother Rick Althorp under their arriving weight. They took care of wounded foemen, too, before the crooks could rally enough to prove dangerous.

The arrivals were the strangers who had been around the Club Scimitar. Rick's guess was right: they came from Washington, a squad of Feds who had reached New Orleans while Norgil, otherwise Swami Zoram, had been making the counterfeiters mark time.

When it came to a double game, Norgil had proven himself more than a match for Rick Althorp, the counterfeiter who had used a gaming palace to flood New Orleans with the neatest brand of imitation currency that the Feds had run across in years.

They talked the whole case over, Norgil and Miriam, while they dined on Pompano *en papillotte*, at Gallion's. Miriam found that she couldn't reprove Norgil for keeping her unaware of things. She had to admit that she would have worried too much, had she known the whole truth.

Crooks had actually ended the career of Swami Zoram when the nitro truck blew up. Norgil gained absolute proof of it when he failed to hear from Zoram the next day, regarding Miriam. The chance to play the role of Zoram, by the simple expedient of crossing the courtyard between two dressing rooms in different theaters, had been too good to lose.

The message from Clarry, with the listed bills, had given the first clue to what was going on. Zoram and Clarry had hatched that little stunt to really worry Rick Althorp, and make him come across with the full fifty thousand dollars, rather than have Feds investigate rumors of counterfeit money in New Orleans.

The voice over the phone had tallied with Rick's. Clarry's death was unfortunate; but from it, Miriam had gained a lead that helped Norgil's cause. As Zoram, Norgil had faked the naming of counterfeit bills on the second night, but it had bothered Rick nonetheless. Norgil's own call to Zoram had been a pretense, for Miriam's benefit.

The final bait, Norgil's subtle way of suggesting how Rick could dispose of Zoram, had involved a huge risk. But Norgil had been sure that Rick would choose to gloat over Zoram while the faker was still alive. That hunch had enabled Norgil to discard his part as Zoram, and become himself again, on the timeliest of occasions.

"Sometimes," declared Miriam, when she heard the story out, "I believe you can do anything. Tonight, you certainly proved your ability to be everywhere at once—"

"Not quite," inserted Norgil, with a rueful head-shake. "I missed out on the most important job of all. I didn't get back to the theater in time to do the last show."

THE END